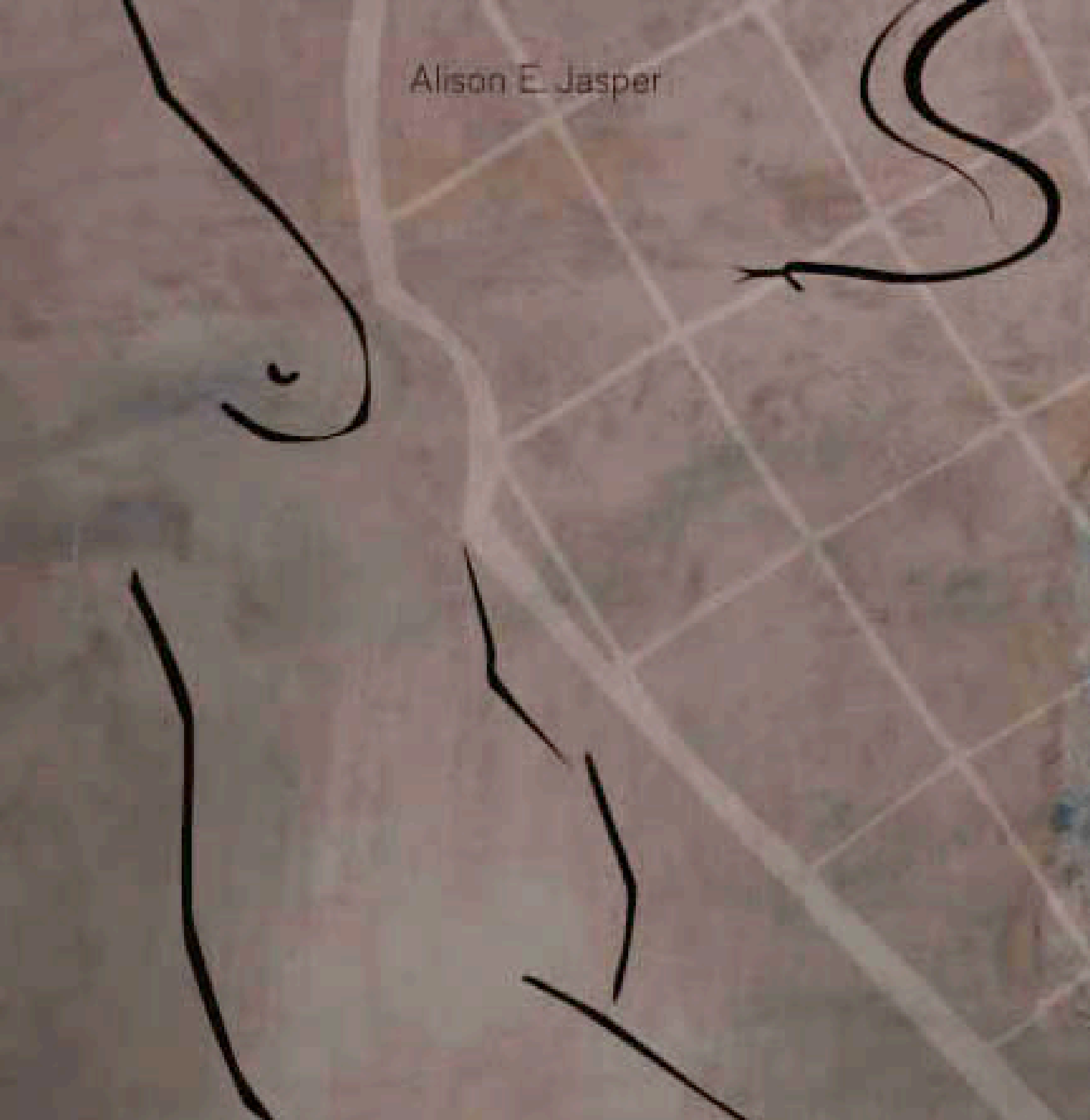
Alison E. Jasper



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Christianity and the Cultivation of Female Genius

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Alison E. Jasper

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For
Hannah, Ruth, and May
with much love

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PART I

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1

Beauvoir and *The Second Sex*

Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle.

— Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

The Second Sex

A series of encounters has been taking place for some time now between Christianity and various kinds of feminists and feminist theory. In these conversations, "woman" is understood within different—Christian and feminist—imaginaries or "sets of metaphors for thinking and enacting the world."[1] Negotiating between these two approaches has sometimes been very difficult and remains challenging. This book supports the work of building bridges between these two imaginaries by developing an understanding of female subjectivity—called here, female genius—that can move, even flourish within both environments.

Before moving on to the sometimes ambivalent relationship between feminist theory and Christianity, let us start by first examining the feminist

[1] John Law and Wen-Yuan Lin, "Cultivating Disconcertment" (unpublished manuscript, last modified December 23, 2009), accessed October 25, 2011, http://www.heterogeneities.net/publications/LawLin2009CultivatingDisconcertment.pdf, 6.

imaginary[2] within which these conversations have emerged. It is clear that feminism has now entered into the public consciousness and that its relevance both to the past and to the present is a familiar theme. One of the key figures responsible for giving new impetus to feminist ideas in the Western world of the twentieth century was Simone de Beauvoir, author, in 1949, of *The Second Sex*.[3] What made her approach different from previous reflections on "the woman question,"[4] was a much more effective analysis of the obstacles to achieving the kind of social justice for which women had been arguing during at least a century of public discussion. What Beauvoir proposed was that differences between men and women were not unavoidable matters of biology, divine providence, or essential "givens" of our human existence to be managed in some way. She argued that women are not born but become what they are as a result of factors—pre-eminently, the assumption of a privileged male perspective. Using her own evocative metaphor to get her point across, she said, for example, that "no biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine."[5] In other words, it was not brute biological fact or unavoidable psychological proclivity that disadvantaged women but a complex set of assumptions, expressed metaphorically as biological or psychological determinism, for example, that disempowered women as some kind of violently emasculated male. Beauvoir believed that we—women and men—are caught up in an often brutal process of becoming human but that this process has been mystified by men or within societies dominated by men, in such a way as to secure and sustain a gendered advantage. In other words, becoming human is framed—and even more, restricted—for women within reified metaphors like marriage,

[2] In talking about feminism it is, of course, important to recognize that it should not be too easily simplified in any "essential" form. The range of feminisms—including, e.g., liberal, Marxist, psychoanalytical, third wave, and post—represent varying commitments to activism, theoretical debate, and ideological premise. See, e.g., Maggie Humm, ed., *Feminisms: A Reader* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992); Charles Beasley, *What Is Feminism?* (London: Sage, 1999); Margaret Walters, *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[3] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1972). Originally published as *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1949). Citations refer to the 1972 translation unless otherwise stated.

[4] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 26.

[5] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 295.

motherhood, or a peculiarly feminine vocation for self-sacrifice, sustained by the perpetuation of social myths designed to naturalize women's inferior status: the importance of women's special contribution to the public good is one of these myths,[6] her so-called biologically determined destiny is another.[7] And, in the course of Beauvoir's book as a whole, dogmatic Freudian psychoanalysis[8] and Christianity are similarly called to account as the mythic forms of a set of philosophical assumptions about normative gender patterns and roles. By telling and retelling these stories, she suggested, men jealously guard the privileges their mystifications afford them in securing the support, service, and admiration of women.

Of course, this cannot be said to have been something so new in 1949 that earlier writers and thinkers would have been completely unable to understand it; the words taken from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of Her Own* that appear at the beginning of this chapter represent a literary expression of a very similar insight expressed twenty years earlier. Woolf's ironic representation of woman-as-mirror shows that she knows very well how her role is primarily to sustain—aggrandize—a categorically different becoming in men through a ritualized metaphor of reflection; the gestures of an attentive wife or mother, for example. Nevertheless, she does not identify or articulate this as part of a systematic philosophical analysis directed explicitly at the (masculine) philosophical reader in the way Beauvoir develops this idea for *The Second Sex*.

Beauvoir, the philosopher, begins her account of what constitutes a woman's subjectivity—female subjectivity—with extreme directness, adopting an existentialist description or imaginary of human consciousness derived in part from Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (1943).[9] Thus, the great question for her is not about mere physical survival but, just as much as for her male

[6] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 28.

[7] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 35–69.

[8] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 69–91.

[9] Nancy Bauer addresses the issue of how Beauvoir's work has been received in the past, arguing that it has been substantially misread as "a lackluster pastiche of the thought of her partner, Jean-Paul Sartre." She notes that "in the last decade or so, however, more and more feminist philosophers have called for a 'return to Beauvoir' and have taken pains to bring to light not only the pronounced philosophical distance separating Beauvoir from Sartre but also the central importance of her use of other philosophers' concepts in *The Second Sex*." Bauer, "Being-with as Being-against: Heidegger Meets Hegel in *The Second Sex*," *Continental Philosophy Review* 34, no. 2 (2001): 130.

colleagues and philosophical friends, an authentic[10] existence that remains the responsibility of every individual to achieve through their own unrelenting endeavors of thought and action. And, of course, the struggle to be a free subject rather than the object of some other individual's will is the important one that, in Beauvoir's eyes, many women failed to sustain. There are powerful incentives within a society perceived through men's eyes and preoccupied with male desires not to do so:

> Man-the-sovereign will provide woman-the-liege with material protection and will undertake the moral justification of her existence; thus she can evade at once both economic risk and the metaphysical risk of a liberty in which ends and aims must be contrived without assistance. . . . Thus woman may fail to lay claim to the status of subject because she lacks definite resources, because she feels the necessary bond that ties her to man regardless of reciprocity and because she is often very well pleased with her role as the Other. . . . To decline to be the Other, to refuse to be a part to the deal—this would be for women to renounce all the advantages conferred upon them by their alliance with the superior caste."[11]

Beauvoir finds the term "bad faith"—adopted from her existentialist circle—useful here. She uses it to describe how women are tempted not to try to think or imagine a way to be women for themselves: Women, she says, are often caught up in a double bind. They are trapped inside the bad faith of men who choose to accept a stereotypical form of female adulation rather than try to think through what it means to be a man for themselves, and thus women find themselves given every encouragement to be accomplices to their own enslavement. In other words, as women accept their oppression at the hands of men, men are once again affirmed in or excused for the oppressiveness of their actions and their assumptions that they have some kind of inalienable privilege:[12]

> It must be admitted that the males find in woman more complicity than the oppressor usually finds in the oppressed. And in bad faith they take

[10] The concept of "authenticity" is used by different existentialist philosophers; e.g., in Heidegger's terms, to invoke a notion of "standing by Oneself." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 166. As Beauvoir sees it, this means also resisting the pressures to give in to a desire to be objectified by another. See Bauer, "Being-with as Being-against," 144.

[11] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 21.

[12] See Andrea Nye, *Feminist Theory and the Philosophies of Man* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 85.

> authorization from this to declare that she has *desired* the destiny they have imposed on her . . . she readily lets herself come to count on the protection, love, assistance, and supervision of others, she lets herself be fascinated with the hope of self-realization without *doing* anything. She does wrong in yielding to the temptation; but man is in no position to blame her, since he has led her into the temptation.[13]

Beauvoir shows in *The Second Sex* that women and men are both caught up in a kind of game of mutual self-objectification—playing either the role of the man who is existentially free or the role of the woman who must herald him as such—both avoiding the ongoing challenge of the fundamental freedom that in existentialist terms requires them to engage with each other genuinely, rather than manage their relationships through limiting fantasies.[14]

Beauvoir's comments, though not unsympathetic, do not always make comforting reading for women, let alone men, seeming almost at times to be "blaming the victim." And yet, although she sees and clarifies the difficulties women encounter by appearing to stand back from their condition, being a woman certainly does remain an issue for her, too. In spite of her own determination to be a philosopher alongside male philosophers and her relative freedom from the limitations of most women's lives—in 1949 she was a kind of French freethinker, unmarried and without dependent children, not wealthy but not on the breadline either, associating with a wide range of people whose lives could hardly have been called conventional—she recognized that she was still different from her close companion, sometime lover,[15] and philosophical fellow traveler, Jean-Paul Sartre "because he was a man."[16] No one could argue that Beauvoir herself had failed to achieve the status of a significant, independent writer in mid-twentieth-century France; she was

[13] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 730. Emphasis in original.

[14] See Bauer, "Being-with as Being-against," 144.

[15] See Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, ed., *A Transatlanic Love Affair: Letters to Nelson Algren* (New York: New Press, 1998), 208: [Sartre] was my first lover, nobody had even kissed me before . . . but it was rather a deep friendship than love; love was not very successful. Chiefly because he does not care much for sexual life. He is a warm lively man everywhere but not in bed. I soon felt it . . . and little by little it seemed useless and even indecent to go on being lovers. We dropped it after about eight or ten years rather unsuccessful in this way." Beauvoir is addressing these comments to Nelson Algren at the beginning of their relationship. She continues, "I did not expect love. I did not believe in being in love and you made me fall in love with you! and come back to Chicago and love you more and more. . . . I guess there will never be another man."

[16] Deidre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), 382.

quite the equal to most men she met in intellectual ability and achievement. She was not tied to standards of bourgeois respectability in relation to her emotional or sexual fulfillment. Yet even someone like Beauvoir knew that this was not the whole story. Arguably, it was the attempt to resolve this tantalizing reflection that drove her to develop her theories about female subjectivity and to write them up in *The Second Sex*.

The discussion of female subjectivity is of key significance here, of course, as it is closely related to the discussion of female genius to which I will return in more detail later. It poses the question of how a woman can be female and not thereby simply an object or victim within a man's world. The Enlightenment imaginary in which Beauvoir and existentialism grew up had focused on the subject as a kind of rational (and uncritically male) self-consciousness, separable from a world of objects and sustained by the notion of God or some other kind of ultimate reality that the work of the earlier French philosopher Descartes (1596–1650) had helped to establish to general satisfaction. Descartes' strategy of reaching a kind of fragile certainty through a process of radical doubt had helped both to establish the reality of the world "out there" and the nature of subjectivity as authoritative (male) self-consciousness.

However, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, elements of this way of looking at subjectivity had come in for increasing criticism. A Cartesian view of self-consciousness failed, for example, to address the fact that our worlds are bound and determined less by the fear that nothing else except consciousness exists (the Cartesian method of doubt addresses this fear) than by the fact that we have to share these worlds with other people.[17] The existentialists, including Beauvoir, therefore, framed themselves as subjects in terms of being or, more exactly, becoming an individual human being through engagement or struggle in a world that included other human beings who might also limit our potential.

As an existentialist philosopher, Beauvoir continued to imagine or view self-consciousness as the basis of subjectivity—rejecting the extremes of psychoanalytical or Marxist analysis that either split human beings between conscious and unconscious motivation or rendered them less individuals who might choose than members of a social group or class. She imagined the human subject dynamically, as being formed out of the conflict between external unchosen circumstances—including the formative ways in which

[17] Bauer draws attention to the philosopher Martin Heidegger (*Being and Time*) as an influence on Beauvoir in this sense. See "Being-with as Being-against," 131.

others see us—and the ability to respond to or give meaning to those circumstances. This was a conflict, of course, that could not guarantee the subject any ontological substance or reality as Descartes had attempted through his strategy of radical doubt. However, Beauvoir's construct did continue to associate subjectivity with responsibility for the choices any individual human being made and, crucially, with a vision of human freedom that Beauvoir identified in *The Second Sex* as being compromised by gender as it was perceived within a certain—male-normative—framework.

Of course, subjectivity can also be understood in a different way from this, and Beauvoir noted that this too impacted the freedom of women to make choices about how to be human. She understood, for example, that men saw women as "imprisoned in subjectivity"[18] as a result of their biological peculiarities. Subjectivity, in this sense, implies the opposite of objectivity: a kind of partiality or limited capacity to act rationally or morally. At its most extreme, this sense of subjectivity implies a complete absence of perspective or ability to judge competing concerns. Women, imprisoned in subjectivity in this sense, are thus assumed to be unaware of life's larger projects. They are seen as fitted to "their place," one that precludes any wider involvement in the world's affairs as determined by men.

Beauvoir, of course, robustly counters this attempt to declare women unfit for the heroic enterprise of mankind on account of this form of "subjectivity" in *The Second Sex*. There is, she says, just as much of this kind of limitation and partiality in men, including the philosophers among them. Men, she shows, assume an epistemic privilege that enters without comment or justification into every aspect of life and work, not excluding philosophical discussions about subjectivity as the freedom to choose how to be human. Beauvoir draws attention to the characteristic imaginative limitations of men and their tendency to fail to achieve the important goal of empathy. Most particularly, in *The Second Sex*, this is their failure to recognize the legitimate and reciprocal status of the other who is a woman.

Establishing empathy—recognizing the legitimate perspective of the other (sex)—is then part of Beauvoir's vision of human (male and female) freedom. Thus, in the introduction to *The Second Sex*, for example, Beauvoir takes the philosopher Emile Lévinas to task for disregarding "the reciprocity of subject and object."[19] By this she means he fails in the task of empathy—he

[18] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 15.

[19] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 16n1.

simply adopts the terms and metaphors of the existing masculine imaginary and fails to imagine for himself the relationship between men and women who are equally free. When he describes woman as mystery, she complains, he "implies that she is mystery for man."[20]

And so, in order to bring this question of female subjectivity out of commonplace masculine imagination/mystification and into the light, Beauvoir formulates the unprecedented question: "What is a woman?"[21]—a question that traditional philosophy would not have asked, because "woman" would have figured simply as an object, an element in a world owned and dominated by so-called human subjects who were always in fact male without qualification or comment. There is no parallel discussion of "What is a man?" because there is no alternative subject position from which to ask this question. "Man" as in "mankind"—a description of the whole of humanity that is still used frequently in common speech—covers the ground. It represents the neutral or normative; that which does not raise questions, that which represents the place to begin or the range of established metaphors for thinking and enacting the world.[22]

Beauvoir concludes that the intractability of the problems facing women arises, then, from the fact that, up until the present, a woman as the occupier of a distinct and distinctive subject position—or bearer of a distinctively different subjectivity, as subject rather than object—simply does not exist within the present imaginary:

> It is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity. A man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong. It amounts to this: just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine. Woman has ovaries, a uterus: these peculiarities imprison her in her subjectivity, circumscribe her within the limits of her own nature. It is often said that she thinks with her glands. Man superbly ignores the fact that his anatomy also includes glands, such as the testicles, and that they secrete hormones. He thinks of his body as a direct and normal connection with the world which he believes he apprehends objectively, whereas he regards the body of woman as a hindrance, a prison, weighted down by everything peculiar.[23]

[20] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 16n1. On the wider question of Lévinas and woman, see Seán Hand, *Emmanuel Levinas* (London: Routledge, 2009), 41–42, 114–15, 117–18.

[21] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 13.

[22] Law and Lin, "Cultivating Disconcertment," 6.

[23] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 15.

As Beauvoir shows, again, this gender blindness and lack of empathy is not merely the failing of the common man. She finds philosophers more often contributing to the existing masculine imaginary than out searching for new metaphors that allow women some scope for establishing their own subjectivity. Referring, for example, to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where the philosopher puts forward the idea that self-consciousness is produced out of a kind of defensive awareness of another,[24] Beauvoir is shocked to conclude that although he recognizes the way in which the formative reciprocity that exists even between master and slave appears to give the inessential slave some advantage over his master, neither he nor his male readers recognize the significance of this lopsided reciprocity for relationships between the sexes. It is Beauvoir's contribution, then, to make use of this Hegelian tool to draw attention to the ways in which we "are so heavily invested in the fact of sex difference and why, in particular, men are tempted to play the role of Absolute Subject and women that of Inessential Other."[25] Reflecting on the biblical myth of male and female interdependence as one flesh, Beauvoir makes the rather bleak assessment that "male and female stand opposed within a primordial *Mitsein* . . . and woman has not broken it."[26] Women have become, she concludes, "the Other" to the male in the sense of being with him merely to provide the definition she lacks herself.[27]

However, it seems clear that, in spite of the difficulties she so acutely envisaged, Beauvoir holds onto her vision of freedom. In her life and work, she crafted a life as a philosopher, a writer, and a lover of women and men, acknowledging that this involved her in the task of finding ways to relate to

[24] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 17. The reference is to "Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness," the first chapter of the second part of G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §§192–95. Hegel employs the image of the master and slave, suggesting that self-consciousness through the mutual recognition human beings desire from each other is ironically achieved only by the slave in this hostile encounter in which the "unessential consciousness" of the slave, by effectively giving him or her a place—albeit a potentially difficult one—outside the framework within which the master remains bound. The resulting condition of humanity could well be described in Hegel's terms as ambiguous.

[25] Bauer, "Being-with as Being-against," 143.

[26] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 19.

[27] The term *Mitsein* (roughly "being with")—borrowed for Beauvoir's own uses from Heidegger—is significant here, of course. It raises the problem of exactly how women are to find their voices and avoid being overwhelmed or drowned in any relationship, but particularly in relationships with men. See also Bauer, "Being-with as Being-against," 133.

others, to strive for genuine empathy.[28] Moreover, of course, in writing *The Second Sex*, she was very successful, for example, in demystifying the burden of traditional "women's work"—both domestic and emotional—showing how it benefits men out of all proportion to women and that the whole idealized narrative of domesticity required serious rethinking. She found ways, in other words, to challenge the sorts of limiting fantasies within which she demonstrated that women and men so often found ways of avoiding what she saw as their freedom genuinely to engage with each other.

Of course, her existentialist approach precludes any absolute limitation on human (male and female) freedom, but neither was she blind to the difficulties raised for women in terms of wider social and cultural forces that worked to constrain women within certain gender structures. When she eventually became involved, in her later years, with distinctively "feminist" causes, long after the publication of *The Second Sex*, one of the key issues that interested her was women's right to abortion[29]—in other words the right absolutely to refuse the socially reinforced role of motherhood that she saw as domestic servitude. Her disparagement of motherhood and female biology[30] probably derives in part from her own background in a traditional bourgeois French family of the early twentieth century, in which her mother toiled incessantly in order to support the appearance of domestic respectability.[31] But it is also clearly a protest against the social and political climate in France in the 1940s and 1950s, which effectively enforced maternity on all sexually active women through the limitations on contraception and abortion effected by a male-dominated church and state alike.[32] Beauvoir's view of female subjectivity drawn up in *The Second Sex* focused attention, then, on the substantial barriers to a woman's freedom represented by the normative male perspective—philosophical assumptions about the nature of both human beings and society—impacting, significantly, on all levels of a woman's life from the most broadly social to the most narrowly personal.

Beauvoir herself, as a young woman, was allowed to prepare for the baccalauréat examination needed to get into university, and to prepare for entry

[28] Bauer, "Being-with as Being-against," 137.

[29] Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 547.

[30] On Beauvoir and issues of motherhood, see Yolanda Astarita Patterson, "Simone de Beauvoir and the Demystification of Motherhood," in "Simone de Beauvoir: Witness to a Century," special issue, *Yale French Studies* 72 (1986): 87–105.

[31] Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 60.

[32] Humm, *Feminisms*, 45.

into the competitive and highly prestigious École Normale Supérieure, even though her parents were initially less than enthusiastic about their daughter's ambition to be a philosopher.[33] And of course, by the time Beauvoir published *The Second Sex*, French women had made some real advances, though it had taken until 1944 for all women in France—as opposed to women in French colonies, who had to wait longer—to gain the right to vote.

However, in spite of these changes that so obviously benefited Beauvoir and her female contemporaries on one level, many attitudes and behaviors toward women and the feminine remained the same—seemingly untouched in spite of each succeeding ideological twist and turn from liberalism through fascism to Marxist communism and socialism. The effective strategies by which differences and inequalities between men and women were maintained were still not fully laid bare. So what was new in Beauvoir's response to the failure of previous attempts at feminist theory was the identification of these strategies. She saw how these strategies were related to existing philosophical assumptions and how, through the nature of the overall imaginary, they infiltrated the most intimate dimensions of relationships between men and women.

In coming to this conclusion, it seems obvious that Beauvoir was drawing boldly and courageously on her own experience as a woman and perhaps especially on her experience of Sartre as both a philosopher and a man. A single incident from Beauvoir's life illustrates the importance of this new approach for her readers, even though she perhaps fails to recognize quite so clearly the connection with her own life. In the autobiographical, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, written in 1958, years after she had established herself as a writer and philosopher, Beauvoir describes the earliest phase of her relationship with Sartre and his circle of male friends. Sartre was then simply another philosophy student in her class, albeit an extremely able one, slightly older, and already established as a rising philosophical star. In *Memoirs*, Beauvoir speaks in the voice of her more mature self, but, strangely, she fails to come to her own defense as the only woman in the company of a group of self-confident young men. The author of *The Second Sex* seems curiously unwilling, even in 1958, to allow that these young men might have been keen to bask in her ready admiration, whether it was justified or not. Beauvoir's account of one particular philosophical argument with Sartre—by the Medici Fountain in the Jardins de Luxembourg in Paris—is overlaid by a

[33] Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 92.

quite extraordinarily uncritical view of herself as inadequate, rightly bested by Sartre's assumed superiority:[34] "I had realized, in the course of our discussion, that many of my opinions were based only on prejudice, dishonesty, or hastily formed concepts, that my reason was at fault and that my ideas were in a muddle." Of course, it is possible that, in this specific context, Sartre had the best of the argument—although Beauvoir says she clung to her system of "a pluralist morality . . . to accommodate the people I liked but whom I didn't want to resemble,"[35] for three hours! But there is no attempt here to give herself credit for intellectual tenacity or courage. Beauvoir, though generally acknowledged as exceptionally clever, was silenced by what can only be assumed was the intimation of Sartre's masculine dominance that took away her ability to see herself as a subject on equal terms—and this inability clearly persisted even into Beauvoir's later life and indeed even after she had written *The Second Sex*. But if Beauvoir could not quite make the connection in relation to her own earlier experiences of men, her analysis in *The Second Sex* of what this kind of behavior between men and women represents is still incisive. A disequilibrium takes shape here in the domination by the male partner, of embodied and intimate relations; it was perhaps, as Miranda Fricker suggests, a consequence of her unacknowledged need for a partner who was her intellectual superior[36]—itself an illustration of this very point she was making in *The Second Sex* about the intimate context within which so many formative choices for the nature of relationships between men and women are made.

It has been said already that Beauvoir does not rely exclusively on existentialist philosophy to uncover and make this disequilibrium visible. She also employs Marxist and socialist critiques of dominant ideologies that "try to pass social arrangements off as natural."[37] However, it is to an underlying existentialist perspective that she returns when she argues that what is wrong with generalities, accepted from men without question, is that they frustrate women's freedom as human beings to reach out for something more, something that transcends "the brutish life of subjection to given conditions."

[34] See Pamela Sue Anderson, "The Lived Body, Gender and Confidence," in *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate*, ed. Pamela Sue Anderson (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2010), 176.

[35] Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, trans. James Kirkup (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1963), 344.

[36] Miranda Fricker, "Life-story in Simone de Beauvoir," in *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Claudia Card (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 218.

[37] Toril Moi, *What Is a Woman?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 29.

She brushes aside what is often regarded as happiness—being at rest, she says, is tantamount to the "en soi" of that brutish life.[38] The existentialist subject must constantly strive for greater freedom: "There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an infinitely open future" to engage in "freely chosen projects."[39]

Beauvoir's Legacy

Today, any reflection on women writers is read in the light of Beauvoir's analysis, and this in itself indicates that her ideas have effected some change to the previous masculinist imaginary. Her radical reading of women's disadvantage as having to do with a set of philosophical assumptions that govern even the most intimate of embodied practices—such as the construct "woman" herself—cannot now be easily ignored in the Western context. As a result of *The Second Sex* in particular and the discussions it engendered, it became accepted wisdom among feminist activists and academics within a couple of decades that questions of equality needed to be considered alongside issues of gender difference, viewed to a greater or lesser extent as the product of human philosophy and social organization.

Within twenty years, a new generation of women who had grown up reading the book began responding in earnest to Beauvoir's earlier ideas, though at first perhaps more strongly in Europe than in the United States.[40] In Britain, Juliet Mitchell, for example, echoed Beauvoir's concern with a masculinist manipulation of biology as cultural symbol: "There is nothing inevitable about the form or role of the family any more than there is about the character or role of women. It is the function of ideology to present these given social types as aspects of Nature itself."[41] The American-born feminist Kate Millet[42] wrote in the same vein that women were socialized and trained to their roles, including their roles in heterosexual relationships, from early infancy and argued that women's oppression derives from the social construction of femininity rather than from her biology. Once again, echoing

[38] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 29.

[39] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 28–29.

[40] See Sandra Dijkstra, "Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan: The Politics of Omission," *Feminist Studies* 6, no. 2 (1980): 290.

[41] Juliet Mitchell, "Women: The Longest Revolution," *New Left Review* 1, no. 40 (1966): 11.

[42] See Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1971).

Beauvoir's claim, she argued that women are not so much born female as made that way by families and societies.[43]

Betty Friedan, the American "prophet of women's emancipation"[44] and author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), also admitted that *The Second Sex* had influenced her own ground-breaking publication. Her reading of Beauvoir was, perhaps, a little less radical. Whereas, for example, Beauvoir describes housework as "the torture of Sisyphus," and as thankless effort in a battle that is never won,[45] Friedan sought more pragmatically to shape it—make it more "woman friendly": "See housework for what it is—not a career, but something that must be done as quickly as possible."[46]

By the early seventies, Beauvoir's influence was apparent across a range of publications by women. In some cases, women were pitched against men in a struggle that seemed even to go beyond the kind of female subjectivity Beauvoir had defined in terms of women's freedom to work out authentic humanity and obtain genuine empathy with men as well as women without sacrificing their own needs and desires.[47] Some women writers were giving expression to an angrier, more impatient, and perhaps more confident demand for change. Women needed to contest privileged male sexual fantasies by being much more sexually assertive, according to Germain Greer in *The Female Eunuch* (1971). Ti-Grace Atkinson said men were going to have the power wrested away from them because it was the only way to deal with them. Their function was to oppress, exploit, lie, betray, and humiliate women,[48] so for her the imagery of the battlefield seemed appropriate. Susan Brownmiller saw confrontational power relations at work in the "rape culture" she described in *Against Our Will* (1975), and Andrea Dworkin similarly spoke in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981) of the need to repel the male sexual violence of pornography, denouncing this as a kind of "metaphysical assertion of self" working itself out on the bodies of women.[49]

In the longer term, elements of Beauvoir's philosophical questions have been developed across a whole spectrum of philosophical works by women.

[43] See, e.g., Nye, *Feminist Theory and the Philosophies of Man*, 96.

[44] Dijkstra, "Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan," 290.

[45] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 470.

[46] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1972), 330, quoted in Dijkstra, "Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan," 294.

[47] Bauer, "Being-with as Being-against," 138.

[48] Ti-Grace Atkinson, *Amazon Odyssey* (New York: Links Books, 1974), 5–7.

[49] Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Pedigree Books, 1981), 13.

Luce Irigaray's response to Beauvoir's discussion of the normative masculine imaginary, for example, emphasizes an in-betweenness and intersubjectivity that seems to reflect something of Beauvoir's earlier concern with empathy.[50] In a different way, Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity[51] theorizes the whole discourse of gender as the outcome of material contexts, produced and maintained by the overwhelmingly powerful effects of social and cultural practice, and this resonates strongly with Beauvoir's discussion of the constructed nature of "woman."

However, while *The Second Sex* explains a great deal about the apparent intransigence of women's disadvantage and has been developed fruitfully by different thinkers who might still all be happy to accept the title "feminist," Beauvoir's legacy has inevitably also been interpreted more superficially and perhaps problematically. For example, there is a view that irreversible change in relation to the status of women has now taken place; Beauvoir's book has become the marker of a perceived cultural transition. This is a view that is even imprinted on works of feminist criticism and literature, as in the words of Judith Thurman introducing the new 2010 translation of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, "it marks the place in history where an enlightenment begins."[52]

While Thurman might protest that to say "an enlightenment begins" does not necessarily mean that there it also ends or is completed, the very language of "enlightenment" tempts us to imagine a smoothed-over narrative of women's progress as something that appears perhaps more assured than it actually is. Possessing female gender in the twenty-first century can still be a mark of degradation, a premise for violence in and of itself. It is also important to recognize that complacency about the situation of Western women in the twenty-first century—the idea that feminism is no longer significant in the West[53]—is often built on the assumption that women and girls in every other geopolitical or historical context exist in a kind of "outer darkness."

[50] See, e.g., Luce Irigaray, *Luce Irigaray: Key Writings* (London: Continuum, 2004), 13–22.

[51] See, e.g., Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 171–90; and *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 198–99.

[52] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage Books, 2010), x.

[53] ". . . contrary to the views of contemporary pundits, feminism has never been more widespread or more politically influential than at this point in history." Estelle B. Freedman, *Feminism, Sexuality and Politics (Gender and American Culture)* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 85. See also http://www.femagination.com/948/false-feminist-death-syndrome/.

Beauvoir's great significance in terms of a perceived cultural transition has perhaps then also had the consequence of contributing to a certain complacency about the possibilities of female subjectivity—in Beauvoir's terms, a woman's capacity to achieve authentic human being alongside men. In fact, important questions remain about the sustainability of feminist values even in contexts within which feminist analyses have had a sympathetic hearing. In the West, we are perhaps in some danger of thinking that, *The Second Sex* having set the agenda, it is being followed and it will necessarily continue to produce or inform good practice.

An even less welcome implication of Beauvoir's legacy—one more intrinsic to her theory itself—is that women's capacity for subjectivity has been seriously compromised in the past; so seriously in fact that it becomes difficult to see how or in what way the theory allows her to have embodied it at all, for example, in contributing to her own emancipation. This is certainly an issue taken up more recently by the philosopher Michèle Le Doeuff, who suggests that the issue of women of the past is a proper matter of concern to feminists of the "third wave." Feminisms have sometimes been divided into—generally three—"waves." Third-wave feminists have drawn particular attention to the limitations of first- and second-wave feminisms[54] as discourses within a fundamentally white and Eurocentric perspective, and they challenge the presumptions of contemporary Western perspectives.[55] But, to date, historical women, especially in the Western world, have been championed less consistently and with less of an eye to the theoretical implications of such a constituency for modern feminist thinking. Le Doeuff addresses the shortfall in precisely this historically inclusive sense: "Wollstonecraft knew nothing of Christine de Pisan or Gabrielle Suchon. Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* without knowing them or really having read Virginia Woolf. Each one seems to start from scratch and from her own present. But the third wave

[54] These terms have both a theoretical and an historical reference. In very basic terms, first-wave feminisms have been concerned with practical equality between men and women, whereas second-wave feminisms, following Beauvoir, have focused on the significance of established differences between men and women.

[55] See, e.g., Chilla Bulbeck, *Re-Orienting Western Feminisms: Women's Diversity in a Postcolonial World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Stacy Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Rebecca Munford, eds., *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and Shelley Budgeon, *Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

could see that we have a past, an international dialogue, and responsibility for the future."[56]

It is surely important, as Le Doeuff suggests, to recognize the historical framework here and to celebrate Beauvoir's critique as an effective tool with which to understand subtle strategies of dominance without consigning thousands if not millions of women to needless silence or false obscurity in the process. Of course, it remains vital to give due attention when it seems women are being ignored or their lives obscured in various different historical or contemporary discourses; this still characterizes what it means to be a woman in some contexts. However, today we also want to be able to acknowledge the past achievements of women as in no universal sense inferior to the past achievements of men and even to be able to acknowledge that women bear some responsibility, not simply for their own actions but also for the present state of human understanding and affairs, as a result of their thoughts and actions—a proposal with some important implications for what we might want to call or acknowledge as achievements.

Beauvoir's own work remains problematic in this historical sense. Although she is prepared to acknowledge that conditions might be changing,[57] she does not see women at work in the process. And she is perhaps justified in not giving too much attention to a handful of intelligent, able, and even powerful historical women, since they do not constitute a movement in the classically Marxist sense of social transformation.[58] On top of this, in a more rhetorical sense, were she to paint too rosy a picture of what some women have been able to achieve in the past, she would undermine the strength of the argument about the wretchedness of women in the present.

However, the net result is that she is unwilling to call even the most gifted or creative of historical women a genius, and her explanation takes her back to the question of female subjectivity. She says that woman cannot create to the same end or on the same scale as man because she is still struggling to become a human being.[59] She claims, for example, that women have not "traversed the given in search of its secret dimension," that women's work lacks metaphysical resonances and anger, and that they do not ask questions of life or expose

[56] Michèle Le Doeuff, *The Sex of Knowing*, trans. Kathryn Hamer and Lorraine Code (New York: Routledge, 2003), 192.

[57] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 20.

[58] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 19.

[59] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 723.

its contradictions.[60] And, in these ways, it appears that she really could not acknowledge the capacity of women to achieve at the highest level, apparently forgetting to apply "her own brilliant analyses of the way that men's vision of society is limited by their preconceptions about their own sexual superiority."[61] It is certainly "difficult to understand" that even after she has conceived of the theory that underpins *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir does not always seem to be able to bring it to bear effectively.[62] However, in relation to the present project, the real problem is that her analysis thus makes it very difficult to apply the idea of female subjectivity—the struggle to be authentically human in a challenging world—to any actual women, or thus to make much sense of the idea of women's achievements (not excluding her own).

What about Christianity?

One problematic aspect of Beauvoir's legacy so far as this book is concerned is her attitude toward Christianity, of course. Beauvoir has no time for it, and this dismissiveness has characterized most of the second-wave feminist movement in the West that she so clearly inaugurated.

Of course, without any reference to Beauvoir, Christianity had been subject by 1949 to a powerful scientific and humanistic critique for several centuries. In influential intellectual and political contexts, it had been fighting a rear-guard action to defend its position as a credible rationale for human existence at least since the seventeenth century, and the wars of the twentieth century had simply presented it with yet another challenge to its moral authority.[63] In *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, Beauvoir—previously an observant Roman Catholic schoolgirl[64]—describes the occasion in her teens when she claims she finally gave up on God: "I was not denying Him in order to rid myself of a troublesome person: on the contrary, I realized that He was playing no further part in my life and so I concluded that he had ceased to exist for me."[65] Beauvoir should not be made personally responsible,

[60] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 720.

[61] Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Women's Press, 1989), 152.

[62] Le Doeuff, *The Sex of Knowing*, 119.

[63] See Nye, *Feminist Theory and the Philosophies of Man*, 74; and Kevin Hart, *Postmodernism* (Oxford: One World, 2004), 129–30.

[64] Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 136.

[65] Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 137.

then, for the hostility or indifference of many feminists toward Christianity after 1949. This also reflected the wider contemporary "ennui" or loss of faith—including but not limited to Christianity—characteristic of the early to middle twentieth-century period in which she was putting togetherher ideas about women. Nevertheless, Beauvoir is more than simply indifferent. She is extremely critical, for example, in what she writes about the connection between Christianity and the bourgeois values she detested: "In the couple the man dominates, but the union of male and female principles remains necessary to the reproductive mechanism, to the maintenance of life and to the order of society." It is then for this reason, she argues, that bourgeois Christianity "respects the consecrated virgin, and the chaste and obedient wife in spite of its hatred of the flesh."[66] The couple remains supreme because within it difference is articulated in terms of the normative aims of society. She admits, a touch ironically perhaps, that "there is a breath of charity in the Gospels that spreads to women as well as to lepers," but overall she concludes, "Christian ideology played no little role in women's oppression."[67] Indeed, through Paul, "the Jewish tradition, savagely antifeminist, was affirmed." However women were attracted to early Christianity, they could only ever take a secondary place in it.[68]

Christianity resonates for Beauvoir, then, with fear of the feminine, which becomes identified with flesh as the hostile other.[69] Christian theology seeks, and in many ways succeeds, in weakening any power that might have been wielded by the maternal body and its creative/destructive power by her taming as Mother:

> And through this submission she can assume a new role in masculine mythology. Beaten down, trampled upon when she wished to dominate and as long as she had not definitely abdicated, she could be honored as vassal. She loses none of her primitive attributes, but these are reversed in sign; from being of evil omen they become of good omen; black magic turns to white. As servant, woman is entitled to the most splendid deification.[70]

Woman within Christianity is for Beauvoir "a wonderful servant who is capable of dazzling [man],"[71] something she finds most perfectly illustrated

[66] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 112.
[67] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 128. See also Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (2010), 104.
[68] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 128.
[69] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 199.
[70] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 204.
[71] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 224.

in the work of the nineteenth-century French Roman Catholic poet Paul Claudel. Claudel, Beauvoir writes, exalts woman to an extraordinary degree, but, once again, in his veneration of her servitude to God, she sees the basis for an assumption that her submission to men can still be justified.[72] For her, this veneration of the male God—in forms of bearded fathers or sons: male angels, male popes, bishops, priests—directs the young girl so that "when feminine sexuality develops, it is pervaded with the religious sentiment that women ordinarily direct towards man from early childhood."[73] The young girl, on her knees alongside the Virgin, the saints, and the repentant Magdalene, "abandons herself to the gaze of God and the angels: a masculine gaze."[74]

Beauvoir's antagonism toward Christianity, however, is, if anything, muted in comparison with that of Mary Daly, who reads Beauvoir appreciatively before embarking on her own career as a radical feminist theologian and writer, ultimately embracing a female separatism in a way that Beauvoir always resisted. Daly's first book, for example, *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968), pays tribute in its title to Beauvoir, a writer she "greatly admired."[75] In this book, she writes with approval of the teenage Beauvoir's clear-headed decisiveness in rejecting the Roman Catholicism of her mother.[76] In subsequent books, and as she moves further away from her initial position as critically Catholic to a more radically disaffected place, she continues to make use of Beauvoirian thoughts from the idea of women as the major consumers of a Christian product of "otherworldliness" to the suggestion that patriarchal Christianity had effectively supplanted the Mother Goddess, setting up the familiar figure of the Mother of God in her stead.[77]

From within the theological academy of the 1960s and 1970s, Daly challenged the Christian churches to lift themselves out of the old mindset and begin thinking differently about women and about theology. Christianity, she thought, following very much along the same lines as Beauvoir's analysis, made the common or garden-variety, day-to-day oppression of women appear part of the order of God's creation and thus quite proper. As she puts it five years after her first book was published—with growing frustration—in

[72] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 261.
[73] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 318.
[74] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 318.
[75] Mary Daly, *The Church and the Second Sex* (Boston Mass.: Beacon Press, 1968), 11.
[76] Daly, *Church and the Second Sex*, 57.
[77] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (London: Women's Press, 1986), 83.

Beyond God the Father (1973): "If God in 'his' heaven is a father ruling 'his' people then it is in the 'nature' of things and according to divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated."[78] Here it is very clear how her work picks up Beauvoir's classification of the normative male. The image is of serious men who make themselves tyrants because they are unable to appreciate the absurdity and "radical ontological impotence" of their unacknowledged subjectivity—as men.[79] Talk about God rests on patriarchal structures that are so much a part of the way we think and relate to others that we are scarcely aware of them, while they exert an overwhelmingly determinative influence on all our lives—not simply those of women but also of men.

> The radical be-ing of women is very much an Otherworld Journey. It is both discovery and creation of a world other than patriarchy. Patriarchy appears to be "everywhere." Even outer space and the future have been colonized. As a rule, even the more imaginative science-fiction writers (allegedly the most foretelling futurists) cannot/will not create a space and time in which women get far beyond the role of space stewardess. Nor does this colonization exist simply "outside" women's minds, securely fastened into institutions we can physically leave behind. Rather, it is also internalized, festering inside women's heads, even feminist heads.[80]

In any event, a large section of feminist opinion also followed Beauvoir's own rejection of Christianity. For Daly, normative masculinity was so closely identified with Christianity that she increasingly felt there was no room within it for any genuinely female perspective. From the 1970s onwards, there are fewer and fewer references in her work to the historical and theological traditions of Christianity, as she tries to free herself and her readers from the tyranny of patriarchal Christianity into forms of theology that evade male hegemony.[81]

[78] Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 13.

[79] Daly, *Church and the Second Sex*, xxvi. Daly also links this, in a later reintroduction to *The Church and the Second Sex*, with a kind of prefiguration found in Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947). Beauvoir does not frame this reflection in gendered terms in 1947, but Daly's gendered application is entirely apt within the context of her developing theology.

[80] Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (London: Women's Press, 1979), 1–2.

[81] Mary Daly, *Quintessence . . . Realizing the Archaic Future: A Radical Elemental Feminist Manifesto* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 15.

Similarly, feminist theologian Carol Christ took off on a new pathway marked by the deliberate development of non-Trinitarian symbols[82] and a discourse of God/dess that, like Daly's Be-ing, rejected Christianity because its images and metaphors seemed simply to enshrine and sacralize the hegemonic male. Another originally Christian feminist who turned away because she felt Christianity's intransigence toward feminist arguments made it intellectually dishonest is the British scholar Daphne Hampson, whose dismay at the "malestream" of Christian theology certainly matches that of Daly and Christ and leads to Hampson positioning herself as post-Christian.[83] Kant, she says, thought the Christian story a myth but a "true myth." Hampson is clearly of the view that the Christian story is, in contrast, "a profoundly patriarchal myth which harms women's interests."[84] More modestly—and subtly perhaps—the philosopher Pamela Sue Anderson has sought simply to keep her eye on the task of challenging the epistemic privilege of masculine gender that remains embedded in the influential texts of Christianity.[85]

Summing up, post-Beauvoir, Kathleen O'Grady refers to "the confusion, shame, hostility and lightly cloaked fear" that many feminist commentators feel toward any Christian or theological interest expressed in apparently feminist texts[86] as if, in Penelope Magee's words, the "'religious/mystical/spiritual' is understood as being absolutely Hellenistic-Christian, or absolutely patriarchal, or, if feminist, absolutely soft-minded and anti-theoretical."[87] It is indeed as if most feminists in the liberal tradition over the last sixty years

[82] See Carol Christ, "Why Women Need the Goddess: Phenomenological, Psychological and Political Reflections," in *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion*, ed. Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 273–87.

[83] See Daphne Hampson, *Theology & Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); *After Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1996); and "Kant and the Present," in *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Anderson, 147–62.

[84] Hampson, "Kant and the Present," 156.

[85] See Pamela Sue Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); and "The Lived Body, Gender and Confidence," in *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Anderson, 163–80.

[86] Kathleen O'Grady, "The Tower and the Chalice: Julia Kristeva and the Story of Santa Barbara," in *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady, and Judith L. Poxon (London: Routledge, 2003), 86.

[87] Penelope Margaret Magee, "Disputing the Sacred: Some Theoretical Approaches to Gender and Religion," in *Religion and Gender*, ed. Ursula King (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 105–6.

have understood Christianity to signify nothing more than narrow-minded misogynistic dogmatism or weak-minded anti-intellectualism.[88]

Even those women who continued to invest their time and energy in the work of academic Christian theology or church life in the wake of Beauvoir's analysis seem often to end up feeling alienated and uncomfortable as they recognize the sense in which her ideas could be so easily mapped onto the structures of what then seemed—viewed through her lenses—to be such a thoroughly patriarchal structure. From the 1970s onwards, theologians, including many of the contributors to highly significant publications like *Womanspirit Rising*,[89] *Weaving the Visions*,[90] and *Feminist Theology from the Third World*,[91] were preoccupied with measuring the impact of this new analysis. It was hard to avoid the view, for example, that the gendered terms in which the Bible described God's relationship with humankind—humankind playing the role in the prophetic books of the Old Testament, for example, of the adulterous or childishly disobedient wife—had been one of the most powerful ways in which people in Christian cultures had "been led to imagine"[92] female subordination.

The critical kind of feminist thinking to which Beauvoir's book gave birth has, then, subjected Christianity to excoriating analysis over the last sixty years. Women have complained that Christian theology and the ways in which churches have been organized are formed from an exclusively or predominantly male perspective that reads, through Beauvoir, as a mythic attempt to pull the wool over women's eyes. Reflecting the influence of all

[88] O'Grady, "Tower and the Chalice," 88.

[89] Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).

[90] Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds. *Weaving the Visions: New Patterns in Feminist Spirituality* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989).

[91] Christ and Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising*; idem, *Weaving the Visions*; Ursula King, ed., *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader* (London: SPCK, 1994).

[92] The reference to the imagination and to its crucial role in structuring and sustaining relationships between women and men comes from the feminist writer and theorist Adrienne Rich, particularly her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision" (1971), in which she describes the idea of "re-visioning" as "a radical critique of literature" and a vital prerequisite. Re-vision is first "a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been till now a male prerogative and how we can begin to see and name—and therefore live—afresh." Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 167.

this articulate and revolutionary feminist scholarship in Christian texts and structures, women in Christian churches began to see how an understanding of the male perspective as normative helped explain why women were so often excluded from theological and ecclesiastical leadership,[93] why they were so often exploited as poorly or unpaid administrative, domestic, or sexual workers for predominantly male Church leaders and theological professors, and why they were still constantly identified with the materiality of embodiment and with the accompanying shame and abuse accorded to them as communal scapegoats.[94]

Of course, there have been more positive assessments of Christianity. Notable women scholars who are happy to refer to themselves as feminists or as strongly influenced by feminist theory have continued to identify themselves with Christianity and the life of the churches.[95] Arguably, a global field of Christian theology and biblical interpretation from the perspective of women within and beyond the Christian West exists and remains in play.[96] Though not all its effective metaphors will come from a Western imaginary, many still invoke ideas of freedom and liberation that resonate strongly with both normative liberalism and—in spite of its engagement with aspects of Marxist theory, most notably in forms of liberation theology—the prophetic Christian tradition of God's preferential option for the poor and marginalized.

[93] See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press, 1983); Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (London: SCM Press, 1984); and Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

[94] See Maxine Glaz and Jeanne Stevenson Moessner, eds., *Women in Travail & Transition: A New Pastoral Care* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence against Women and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); and Miryam Clough, "Shame: The Church and Female Sexuality," Ph.D. diss., University of Bristol, 2010.

[95] See Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1991); Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Susan Frank Parsons, *Feminism and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Mary Grey, *Sacred Longings: Ecofeminist Theology and Globalization* (London: SCM Press, 2003); and Lucy Reid, *She Changes Everything: Seeking the Divine on a Feminist Path* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2005).

[96] See Susan Abraham and Elena Procario-Foley, eds., *Frontiers in Catholic Feminist Theology: Shoulder to Shoulder* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009); and Mary Streufert, ed., *Transformative Lutheran Theology: Feminist, Womanist and Mujerista Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

For example, Lisa Isherwood[97] and Marcella Althaus-Reid[98] have both worked in the interdisciplinary contexts of liberation theology and body and queer theory, challenging orthodox Christianity's conservative attitude toward the symbolism of body and gender that has tended to configure sinful humankind in terms of a female and bodily materiality, shamed in the presence of the disembodied masculine spirituality of God. Other feminist theologians like Elaine Graham and Heather Walton[99] similarly hold positions that are in some sense "at the margins" of Christianity—that is to say, not definitively outside. Walton argues, for example, that Christianity cannot be reappropriated by women without painstaking work by both men and women to avoid the extreme dangers of its historical patriarchal framing. She is wary even of feminist rereadings of the Bible because of the potential to strengthen rather than critique or deconstruct misogynistic traditions.[100] Yet, at the same time, her work also gives plenty of evidence of a continuing teaching and pastoral role for women within the Christian churches.

Tina Beattie is a Catholic feminist who is equally wary of the Christian church—particularly in its Roman Catholic form[101]—without wanting completely to cut the ties. She is concerned, for example, about conservative theologians who continue to wield considerable influence in the Roman Catholic Church and to have what she sees as a pernicious effect on women within that church's global context.

For Beattie, a particularly problematic conservative theologian is Hans Urs von Balthasar, who is commonly regarded as one of the most significant Roman Catholic theologians of the twentieth century. Beattie protests that although Balthasar's work is strongly marked by his understanding of sexual difference as a ruling theological metaphor, in his hands the metaphor takes on all the characteristics of gendered difference that Beauvoir seeks to

[97] See, e.g., Lisa Isherwood, *Introducing Feminist Christologies* (London: Continuum, 2001); *The Power of Erotic Celibacy* (London; T&T Clark, 2006); and *Fat Jesus: Feminist Investigations in Boundaries and Transgressions* (New York: Seabury Books, 2008).

[98] See, e.g., Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000); *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003); and *From Feminist Theology to Indecent Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2004).

[99] See, e.g., Heather Walton, Elaine Graham, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005); and Heather Walton, *Imagining Theology: Women Writing and God* (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

[100] Heather Walton, *Imagining Theology*, 86.

[101] See in particular on this, Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2006).

avoid. For example, Balthasar's idea of "theo-drama" is not only the surrender of human subjectivity for the purposes of playing a role in the drama of Christian salvation, but it is also and unmistakably the surrender of human (submissive, female) subjectivity to the divine (dominant, male) subjectivity of the Trinity.[102] Beattie is singularly unimpressed: "for the gendering of creation and God in Balthasar's theo-drama does not entail difference, love and desire, but sameness, violence and conquest. Underneath his lavish rhetoric, we discover the same old stereotypes of man as presence, divinity, activity and revelation, and woman as absence, nature, passivity and silence."[103] Yet Beattie—unlike Daly in her later years—remains hopeful about the Roman Catholic Church. There is plenty that is wrong with it, she says, especially in relation to its historical understanding and mobilization of gender, but those who oppose the whole European legacy of Christianity have little, she says, that is better to offer for the present and future of women. In response to critical voices like that of Judith Butler, she suggests that perhaps they "protest too much" in their "refusal of the kind of hope that faith might invite."[104]

Significantly, Beattie's defense of a Christian imaginary is also derived from that strand of theology—that extended metaphor if you like—that emphasizes the church's prophetic ministry to the poor and marginalized: in a world characterized by the suffering of poverty, hunger, and violence, the Christian church still represents an alternative, more loving vision. In particular, Beattie sees Roman Catholicism—beyond the vision of von Balthasar—as potentially hospitable toward the female body in a way that can engender genuine conversations between Christianity and feminism. She emphasizes the resources of the Roman Catholic tradition in terms of the riches of its ritual and liturgical life. Prayer and the liturgy of the Mass offer adherents "a space of welcoming and nurturing love"[105] evoking "meaning and responses beyond our rational, conscious thought processes,"[106] and once again allowing for the revelation of God through all the embodied dimensions of human being.

Of course, she is still forced to acknowledge her church's continuing failure as an institution actually to accept this female body as a context for

[102] Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 101.
[103] Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 208.
[104] Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 68–69.
[105] Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 71.
[106] Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 301.

divine revelation in such a way that it is not—as a precondition of suitability—required to be mortified, veiled, or ultimately denied. The institution of the Roman Catholic Church in Beattie's view needs to address the symbolism of the female body actually and positively: "until the female body can participate fully in the process of deification that unfolds in liturgical time, how can we tell the story of the wedding feast, which is surely a celebration of sexuality, desire and fecundity, when one body is permanently assigned to the role of bystander, a guest who watches the consummation of divine love without herself being necessary to the act?"[107] Although the church is struggling to put aside its "profound fear of female sexuality" and focus more of its attention on the arguably much more pressing issues of peace, justice, and sexual equality,[108] she implies that it is still not struggling hard enough. On balance, however, Beattie's position is pro-Christian and pro-Catholic.

Perhaps because the prophetic tradition of Christianity's mission to the poor and marginalized plays such an important role in the work of many of these feminist theologians, it is hard to assess how much influence the feminist discourse referred to here maintains within the—enduring—global context of established Christian churches or communities of academic theologians still dominated by men. For this book, however, the problem is not so much about Christianity's moral or metaphysical claims and/or failures in themselves as about the way in which Beauvoir and feminist theory more generally has dismissed it as a toxic tradition for women. The smoothed-over view, to which some readings of Beauvoir and second-wave feminisms seem to contribute, would claim that women find their place in the world only insofar as they shed their Christian identity or faith.

This view leaves a multitude of women in something of a quandary, rendered almost as silent as under patriarchal "erasure." Either, as Christian women, they are locked into a kind of second-class existence that is always situated at a peculiar disadvantage and in which their achievements are inevitably tarnished by association, or they are subtly reprocessed. Their Christian commitment read as "merely" or "simply" an element of their historical contextualization, in which any sense of personal commitment is carefully bracketed off under such formulations as the "inappropriateness" of feminist analysis on this point.

[107] Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 301–2.
[108] Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism*, 5.

On the whole, therefore, it would be fair to say that, post-Beauvoir, Christianity and the Christian churches have been very largely dismissed by the majority of feminist thinkers, and this raises an important question: is it possible, to represent women of the past who have drawn significantly on their identity or experience as Christians robustly, without bracketing off this important source or influence in their lives? For the majority of women in the West, Christianity has been normative for centuries. For some, of course, it continues to be so. In contrast, modern Western feminist discourse tends to privilege what it assumes to be secular over what it defines as religious,[109] on the grounds that Christianity is deeply implicated in the rationalizing and mystifying of sexism and misogyny. But if this is true, it is also true that to bracket Christianity off means that we end up having nothing to say about the rich and complex Christian experience of so many women, except that they were misled.

It is important to say at this point that it is not the intention of this book to defend every practice or theological position taken by pre- or nonfeminist women in Christianity, but rather to suggest that there may be a way of recognizing their varied experiences without having to limit ourselves to the observation that they were co-opted into a set of patriarchal, masculinist structures in which their role was simply to service men and a distinctly masculine God. It might be possible to suggest instead, for example, that they exemplify in some ways not simply resistant practices and readings of tradition but also genuinely creative readings and adaptations on their own terms and as the product of a kind of female subjectivity that I intend to define as female genius. There is, in other words, some room perhaps to explore the lives and work of women who have evoked a community or communion of readers[110] and who have identified themselves as Christians but nevertheless have also developed or adapted their approaches in important ways that register but do not fully conform within the normative masculinist framework Beauvoir identified. Their stories might, for example, follow different patterns: an ongoing desire for and commitment to thinking and to the life of the embodied mind, being highlighted in this context. In sum they might

[109] Arguably Western feminists have shared in a tendency so far to use this distinction as if it was unproblematic rather than, e.g., ideological, "with a specific location in history, including the nineteenth-century period of European colonization." Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2000), 4.

[110] Julia Kristeva, *Colette*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 426.

reflect what is achieved as much in the pleasures of dialogue with problematic patriarchal structures as in out and out rejection of them, and in consequence, it might be possible not to dismiss the relationship these women have to Christianity as the key obstacle to the establishment of any kind of female subjectivity.

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2

Female Genius and Christianity

> As long as she still has to struggle to become a human being, she cannot become a creator . . .
>
> —Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

Getting Started

I have said that the aim of this book is to help bridge a gap between the important resonant and energizing feminist critique of the second wave and beyond with its theoretical debt to the work of Simone de Beauvoir and the stories of countless girls and women whose creative capacity to think differently for and of themselves could be said to pave the way for that critique. It is also an attempt to give the lie to a smoothed-over narrative of progress that prevents us from recognizing forms of female subjectivity or female achievement that occur outside the bubble of normative, contemporary, Western, so-called secular liberalism. Paradoxically, this narrative also has the effect of disguising or veiling the sense in which women and girls still have to struggle against the brutality of patriarchal systems and masculinist thinking, even within these apparently liberal conditions.

This problematic situation is illustrated, to give one example, in the work of feminist biblical interpretation in the 1970s and 1980s. Here, there is already a tension between "Beauvoirian analysis"—emphasizing the excluding, normative male perspective—and resistance to the idea that women did

not count—to use the image chosen by the feminist economist, Marilyn Waring[1]—within Christianity or in its Scriptures. Radical feminist readings of the Bible in this earlier period focused on its "texts of terror"—its silencing of women, its stories of casual violence, its toxic symbols, and the reduction of women to mere objects or to the empty otherness that defined a real male presence. Yet, at the same time, feminist biblical critics and theologians exercising a hermeneutics of suspicion[2] were also recording the presence of biblical women as acting, speaking subjects. The tombstones set up by a feminist biblical reader like Phyllis Trible to memorialize those women who had been literally or metaphorically silenced and excised from the social and cultural imaginary sustained by the biblical text were set against attempts to make women present as subjects by rereading or miming[3] or re-visioning[4] or

[1] Marilyn Waring, *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

[2] The expression "hermeneutics of suspicion" can be traced back to the work of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur aims to defend a Kantian-like notion of the will and of the "subject" against critics of Kantian autonomy such as Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, and Derrida who are suspicious of metaphysics (see, e.g., Karl Simms, *Paul Ricoeur* [London: Routledge, 2003], 76). He tests his own interpretations against these more suspicious minds. The term has been taken up by some feminist scholars of hermeneutics in order to support a move away from "the pervasive biblical apologetics that has dominated the studies of women in the Bible." The method she chooses "heavily relies on a traditional historical-critical method of analysis sharpened by a "hermeneutics of suspicion." Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press, 1983), xxiii.

[3] This is a form of reading or interpretation of patriarchal texts adopted, e.g., by the French psychoanalyst and poststructuralist philosopher Luce Irigaray most notably in her feminist rereading of the myth of Antigone as it appears in patriarchal tradition. See, e.g., Margaret Whitford, ed., *The Irigaray Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 198–203. Anderson calls these readings or mimings "disruptive": "[Irigaray's] mimings of already configured myths release the content and energy for a new reality and a new utopia." Pamela Sue Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 153.

[4] "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society," (Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi [New York: W. W. Norton, 1994], 167). In a poem written in 1972, Rich encapsulates the paradoxical nature of revisioning by referring to the intrepid feminist diver who goes down to explore the wreck/find the traces, carrying "a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear" ("Diving into the Wreck," in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Gelpi and Gelpi, 54).

reconstructing[5] their words and actions and setting them up as exemplary, rebellious, authoritative, transformative, or even—harking back to the more traditional maternal and queenly associations of the figure of Mary—divine.[6]

In other words, the movement of feminist theology and biblical interpretation at that time was trying to address a complicated set of issues that did not respond easily to one approach. It was trying to deal with the need to make complicated or even opposing claims—that women have been dominated, disadvantaged, and unjustly silenced and that they have managed to do more than simply endure their domination by conforming to a set of unjust and oppressive conventions. Again, we can say that it was profoundly more important and satisfying for them to engage in dialogue with these problematic structures than somehow to try to avoid them altogether.

The claims about an unjust dominance over women—especially in relation to Christianity—had been made strongly by Beauvoir and Daly and others who followed their lead. However, at the same time, to deny women the possibility of ever having counted, either as individuals or as a class or group, is highly problematic from a feminist perspective, because this approach shares so much common ground with a view of women as natural victims—losers on a global scale.

Nevertheless, these somewhat contradictory needs have sometimes promoted a vigorous growth in work that uncovers or revisits the lives of women in the history of the West and motivates a search for previously disregarded women writers and historical figures. Having many more narratives about women to draw on feeds the imagination and dramatically widens our view of what women can do. However, in relation to these expanding resources, Christianity—and in a similar way in other contexts, Islam—is often still bracketed off as an obstacle that is incompatible with "normative liberal assumptions about freedom and agency"[7] that underpin virtually all recent

[5] "Rather than begin with a kyriarchal model of historical reconstruction that assumes women's marginality or absence as historical agents, a critical feminist historical reconstructive model . . . begins with the assumption of wo/men's presence as an agency rather than with the kyriarchal preconstructed discourse of their marginality and victimization." Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 163.

[6] The earliest treatment of Mary from this second-wave perspective is Marina Warner's book, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*, first published in Great Britain in 1976.

[7] Saba Mahmood, "Agency, Performativity and the Feminist Subject," in *Bodily Citations*, ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 178.

feminist discussions about women. Even as accounts of women's lives and work are discovered they are, in a sense, re-covered; post-Beauvoir, Christianity seems inescapably woven into a narrative of negative assessment. But, of course, in spite of the power of Beauvoir and Daly's feminist critiques of Christianity—and of others in the same vein—ignoring or bracketing off the sense in which Christianity informs women's desires and actions is a risky strategy; for example, insofar as these assumptions are politically liberal, they have the potential to discount a whole range of ways in which women have traditionally negotiated for space and recognition. There are problems with universalizing modern Western feminist discourse and treating its underlying assumptions as if they were "features of the world rather than of a culturally specific way of understanding it."[8]

The purpose of questioning this view, though, should not be seen as an attempt to unpick the achievements of the last sixty years in terms of genuine political and social gains for women. Nor is it an attempt to reinstate institutional Christian authority over the discussion of women. It is, rather, to challenge uncritical views of women under patriarchy—in this case, specifically Christian patriarchy. It is also about being open to the possibility that women have engaged with Christianity directly, rather than always assuming that they have been reactive or restricted to negotiating their ways around it. And by "Christian" women, it should be understood that we are talking about women who, as Christians, are also motivated to respond actively to or to write about Christian theology, piety, duty, or practice. These are women for whom Christianity, church, or Christ is a sustained focus of interest: more or less problematic structures to be engaged through the pleasures, particularly, of writing.

This then is a proposal to treat Christian women as complex subjects rather than being content to identify Christianity as an invariably damaging framework or structure. Overall, the intention is to use the idea of female genius in order to open up discussions of female subjectivity in the context of the "vexed relationship between feminism and religious traditions"[9]—in order to suggest that it might be possible for women to move or even to flourish within both environments.

[8] Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2005), 3.

[9] Saba Mahmood, "Agency, Performativity and the Feminist Subject," 178.

No Insignificant Zeros

It might seem strange then—given these aims—to use a term like genius to describe a specifically female form of achievement. In a Christian European context, the concept of genius comes to describe a creativity that in some way parallels divine creativity and thereby inevitably reflects the normative male gender of God within this tradition. But it clearly also derives another level of masculinity from earlier classical notions of genius as the household deity associated with the paterfamilias and the deification of the power of (male) generation.[10] Achieving the same, or at least a comparable, effect in more modern times, even when it no longer makes direct reference to transcendent divinities, the more modern view of genius is still an apotheosis of traits and activities possessed by men, even when described as "feminine."[11] Whether it is related to the divinely initiated power of procreativity, to skill, talent, ingenuity, reason, passion, sexual energy, or imagination, or even if it is said to walk a "sublime" path between "sanity" and "madness," between the "monstrous" and the "superhuman,"[12] the history of genius reflects its persistently masculine character. Even as the criteria for genius change, the sense persists that women cannot satisfy them, or only in a derivative sense, or only if they relinquish or gain some improperly masculine quality. There is a thoroughgoing rhetoric of exclusion[13] nicely illustrated by Le Doeuff, for example, in the comparable sphere of women's ability to think as philosophers: "whenever a woman shows some talent for ideas, an automatic reflex is triggered: *ipso facto* and gratuitously, she is judged somehow deficient, unable to satisfy certain male expectations, whose legitimacy moreover is never questioned."[14]

The pattern is strongly marked in the development of genius within European Romanticism, when there was a profound change in both aesthetic theory and style, favoring spontaneity, feeling and intuition, emotional expression, and the limitless or monstrous sublime over the absolute priority of order, restraint, and proportion that had been so highly valued within the

[10] See Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 630.

[11] Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Women's Press, 1989), 4.

[12] Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, 148.

[13] Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, 4.

[14] Michèle Le Doeuff, *The Sex of Knowing*, trans. Kathryn Hamer and Lorraine Code (New York: Routledge, 2003), 3.

previous classical period. Of course, these were all qualities previously viewed as indicative of moral, rational, or aesthetic weakness and, generally, also "feminine." Yet when the Romantic artist takes these qualities on board, it appears that it is only to make his masculine superiority yet more profound, while the women whose "feminine" qualities he seems so anxious to adopt continue to be excluded from the elite of nineteenth-century high culture.

Ironically, it seems that this formulation of genius blossomed at the very point in the history of ideas in the Western world when thinkers actually seemed poised to formulate an idea of human being and creativity that challenged the formal, divinely guaranteed hierarchies of rank and occupation. In the middle of the eighteenth century, Jean Jacques Rousseau published a treatise on education and human nature called, *Emile or "On Education"* (1762), which expressed the radical view that a young person such as Emile—the hero of Rousseau's treatise—was not destined for a particular role or end by reason of his birth or divine decree. Emile was capable of finding out for himself what was virtuous and valuable. The implication was that these abilities or qualities could flourish among orders of people who had previously been regarded either as incapable of benefiting from any kind of education or as inappropriate subjects of education. And, of course, to some of Rousseau's readers, like Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, it suggested that this critique could address the situation of women as well.[15]

Yet in the fifth volume of Rousseau's treatise—concerned with Emile's domestic and civil life—it becomes clear after all this that his well-being is still dependent on a group of people who can have no aspiration to become geniuses themselves and whose education therefore is set out in very different terms; in other words, his success depends on the familiar story of women's necessary self-sacrifice to which Beauvoir was later to make reference as a myth designed to naturalize women's inferior status.[16] In order to achieve the perfection of genius, Rousseau's strong, unique, authentic male ego required mothers, housekeepers, and self-giving lovers to nurture and sustain it.[17] It is not hard to see how trying to rearrange Rousseau's principles to arrive at a picture of *female* genius would be constantly frustrated by the limitations of the Romantic masculine imaginary in which genius was a kind of metaphor

[15] See Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Miriam Brody (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1992), 103.

[16] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1972),

[17] Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, 135.

that necessarily reduced female creativity to the fanciful, the pseudocreative,[18] or the freakish.[19]

This Romantic understanding of genius has had a long reach, affecting even Beauvoir in the twentieth century when she was producing her most significant writing and when, in spite of the groundbreaking work she did to lay bare the strategies by which the normative male established and sustained himself, she still seems to have become entangled in that idea of genius as a male preserve. Struggling to defend a woman's capacity to choose, Beauvoir concludes that a failure of will or bad faith on the part of many women is "the deep-seated reason for [woman's] mediocrity."[20] So her analysis of the normative male and the (im)possibilities of becoming female "human beings"—subjects on the same terms as men—does not prevent her from being sometimes very dismissive of the capacity of women. It occurs to her, for example, that it might be appropriate to consider Emily Brontë, Rosa Luxembourg, or St. Theresa as geniuses, but only St. Theresa approaches the standard she sets.[21] And neither Theresa's "total abandonment" of her personal self—rising, so to speak, above the kind of subjectivity that limits a woman to "her place"—nor her equally wholehearted investment in the "situation of humanity" is enough to make her comparable in genius with a Van Gogh or a Kafka. Beauvoir allows that some women can achieve a kind of creative fulfillment, but in relation to an understanding of genius that seems analogous to Schopenhauer's view of it—a kind of suspension of self in order to let the "universal" or objective truth control mind and body—"like some kind of shaman"[22]—only men can be fully identified as such. Yet it is surely true that "in the history of culture women have been neither absences nor insignificant zeros . . . there have been great women artists, whose achievements have been such as to merit being praised as 'geniuses.' "[23]

Julia Kristeva's formulation of female genius—on which I will draw substantially—similarly resists Beauvoir's negative view of the defining, negative otherness of the female and the definitive impossibility of female genius. In contrast to Beauvoir, Kristeva equates female genius precisely with women's ability to achieve subjectivity, thus seeking to reclaim directly the territory

[18] Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, 145.
[19] Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, 129.
[20] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 722.
[21] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 722.
[22] Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, 155.
[23] Battersby, *Gender and Genius*, 153.

dissolved for women in Beauvoir's formulation of the normative male. However, what makes Kristeva's idea especially attractive is the sense in which it allows us to start with the assumption that women are able to think and to be creative as subjects without denying that their lives and situations are also limited, often in the way Beauvoir describes. And here, Beauvoir's own inability to be thoroughly consistent seems helpfully complex. On the one hand, she analyzed the problem of female subjectivity with extraordinary clarity and was also able to resist its implications, but not all the time and in every circumstance. On the other hand, her inability to resist the implications of what she was arguing at every point did not mean she had nothing useful or insightful to say.

In other words, perhaps we do not have to choose between saying that women are helpless victims and saying that they are unaffected by limitations. Instead, we can say that the truth lies somewhere in between, fluctuating according to other contextual features such as wealth, health, education, or emotional, social, and geographical location. More recent feminist analyses, following Beauvoir, have enabled us to see the shape of the problem for women much more clearly, but arguably we still need to find some way of acknowledging that some women—and I am proposing that we call them female geniuses—have always been up to the challenges of addressing and overcoming this problem.

Back to Christianity Again

Feminist biblical analysis has revealed malestream biblical and theological representations of the divine creator to be profoundly masculine. But it is now no longer so unacceptable to suggest that there might, for example, be connections between the God of Genesis 1 whose very word and breath were the means of creation, the Word or Logos of John's Gospel, and the feminine figure of Wisdom, Sophia—the hypostasis of divine creativity from the Old Testament and apocryphal Wisdom literature.[24] The work done by feminist theologians in particular over the last sixty years has begun to open up ways of thinking not simply in terms of a feminist critique but also more creatively as, for example, in the case of Kristeva, who revisits Christian language, imagery,

[24] See Martin Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Suppl. 71 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992); Caitlin Matthews, *Sophia: Goddess of Wisdom, Bride of God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Quest Books, 2001).

and narratives, consciously redeploying the familiar Christian metaphors of birth and resurrection in new and fruitful ways for women.[25]

As more and more material about the work of women as readers and shapers in various ways of the Christian tradition finds its way into published or online forms, this body of work begins to unravel parts of a view of the past and to bridge the epistemological gap that is formed partly by women's lack of confidence in their own capacity as female geniuses, partly by actual "patriarchal erasure" and partly by the mythic representation of that erasure as total. In a contemporary context, of course, there is more acceptance that theology is something women can and should now undertake. A parallel contemporary oversimplification, however, continually attempts to reduce the complexities, making the default "historical woman" someone without any kind of power or warrant. In consequence, a process of development and change that may have taken centuries of movement—perhaps both progressive and regressive—is telescoped into the view that feminism is passé in the Western world because there is now no longer any issue to address, while outside the Western world, women languish in darkness waiting for final deliverance.

The idea of female genius to be developed here, then, has the aim of guarding against these kinds of oversimplification, allowing us to tell a more nuanced story, particularly of women in the past who, while struggling to be taken seriously, managed, perhaps even in the way Beauvoir defines genius in relation to men, to make their mark on the world and feel in some sense responsible for it,[26] but equally, who may have achieved something in a different register than that commonly recognized as genius in male-normative terms. As accounts of women's lives and thoughts are recovered and read, readers are in a better position to counter the underlying normative perspective of which this oversimplification is an expression. They present us with the surprising complexity of many singular lives in which female genius is achieved in the pleasures of a courageous and creative dialogue with the problematic structures created as a consequence of male-normative perspectives.

It is important to remember that women have not been discounted as geniuses in the past on the basis of an extended and careful reading of their lives or creative output so much as on the basis of assumptions that accord

[25] Julia Kristeva, *Colette*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 422–23.

[26] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 722–23.

with prevailing attitudes of sexism and misogyny. However, it is also important to recognize that an individual woman like Beauvoir may be inconsistent, as I have already suggested—unable to apply her theory at every point to her own life—and still help to build our confidence in a new, less limited perspective on what we can achieve as women alongside men. It should not imply that she cannot help us see our own situation in a new or different way or that we cannot, for this reason, also call her a female genius.

Contesting limiting expectations about women, then, it is appropriate to say that women interested in metaphysics and meaning, God and the Christian life, have been able to rearrange particular forms of patriarchal Christianity to some degree, in order to create new relationships or certain kinds of pleasures—including those of the pious kind—in ways that could be appropriately described as the work of female genius. The stories of the saints, for example, include many stories of women such as Mechthild of Magdeburg and Hildegard of Bingen,[27] who interpreted their visionary experience variously through music, medicine, art, and theology. More than one saintly account describes a woman who rejected the patriarchal responsibilities of marriage and motherhood in order to follow a Christian vocation and gain, in this way, some legitimacy for a choice regarded, outside Christian hagiography, as disobedient or eccentric. For example, the popular second-century Encratist text, the *Acts of Paul*, contains the story of Thecla, who resisted her parents' attempts to force her to marry in order to follow the Apostle Paul.[28] Similarly, the twelfth-century *Life of Christina of Markyate* recounts how Christina fought against all efforts to marry her off, though her parents even conspired with her suitor to enter her bedroom and force himself on her while she was asleep. The fourteenth-century saint Catherine of Siena similarly defied her family's expectation that she would marry in order to pursue her desire to enter into a mystical marriage with Christ.[29] While none of this represents a total rejection of normative patriarchal assumptions and attitudes, it does illustrate that these have often been under pressure, not the least from women who have identified a desire to follow a Christian vocation as their motivation.

[27] See Alison Jasper, *The Shining Garment of the Text: Gendered Readings of John's Prologue* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), 58–82.

[28] Karen Armstrong, "The Acts of Paul and Thecla," in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, ed. Ann Loades (London: SPCK, 1990), 83–89.

[29] Eleanor McLaughlin, "Women Power and the Pursuit of Holiness in Medieval Christianity," in *Feminist Theology*, ed. Loades, 99–122.

In other words, it seems wrong to assume that women have had no capacity at all to transform worlds until the last sixty years, during which the writing and the work of thousands of women has become increasingly available to us—though some of all this has most certainly been seen and read by others before us. The sexism of readers who have cut out or lost or ignored this work of women cannot be discounted, but neither should it be credited with an influence or effectiveness to which it is not entitled.

So did those feminist theologians and biblical critics, in fact, overstate the case when they mapped Beauvoir's ideas onto Christian theology and saw with such dismay how God was Man writ large? They were surely right to stress the stifling effect of patriarchal Christianity in which it was a struggle to gain validation for anything that could not be measured on a patriarchal scale. These memories of extraordinary women are still occluded by the view that women do not or cannot "do genius" or be creative in the extraordinary "godlike" way of the past. Nevertheless, it seems wrong to assume, therefore, that women have had no hand already in bringing about change and transformation through their creativity—both maternal and otherwise—and through their divergences from the prevailing patriarchal culture. There are now surely no longer good reasons why genius—celebrated because it creates, enlivens, and transforms our worlds in a multitude of ways both dramatic and discreet—should be distinguished from what is female or from the work women do and have done already, for example, to bring us to this point of recognition.

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Kristeva and Female Genius

For better or for worse, the next century will be a female one—
and female genius, as described in this work, gives us hope that it might be
for the better.

—Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xii

From Simone de Beauvoir to Julia Kristeva

The idea of the female genius, though connected with themes from her earlier work, emerges distinctly in three books Julia Kristeva published between 1999 and 2002 under the title *Female Genius: Life, Madness, Words—Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, Colette*. And though she is not one of Kristeva's three female geniuses, Beauvoir nevertheless remains a significant presence in the trilogy and, ultimately the figure to whom Kristeva dedicates the work as a whole.[1] The fact that she does not fully acknowledge her debt to the earlier philosopher until the final volume[2] does suggest a certain ambivalence, and it is clear that Kristeva's admiration for Beauvoir does not preclude some reservations about her philosophical approach, not the least on the subject of genius—and more on this shortly.

[1] Julia Kristeva, *Colette*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 403.

[2] Kristeva, *Colette*, 407.

However, there is also a sense in which Kristeva clearly wishes to avoid stereotyping Beauvoir as a feminist, and this points to something distinctive in Kristeva's approach. Kristeva's three female geniuses and Beauvoir are all women who have brought a kind of revolutionary force to bear as thinkers, writers, activists, and performers "sharing their unique perspective on the most important issues of our time."[3] This is important for Kristeva, as she wants to avoid limiting definitions or stereotypical expectations because they import presuppositions into the discussion about what women or female subjectivity could amount to even before it can get started. Carefully accumulating examples, she therefore tries to discount stereotypes—like "Beauvoir the feminist"—as "no more than a few trees obscuring forests that are far more appealing but that are also dangerously more complex."[4] She tries, then, not to make female genius wholly dependent as an idea on the modern feminist narrative.

Although she knows that Beauvoir's work—especially in *The Second Sex*—represents a substantial intellectual contribution to social and political debates about women in twentieth-century Europe, she shows by choosing to write about Klein, Arendt, and Colette, none of whom can really be viewed in a narrow sense as "feminists," that the idea has a broader range. "Pre-" or "non-" or "not quite–" feminists are capable of finding ways to contest limiting masculine and patriarchal structures for themselves. Arguably, they have already taken on the role through their dialogue with these problematic structures of helping to bring about changes that, for example, create circumstances in which a Colette or a Daly or indeed a Beauvoir can be heard or encouraged to write.

Of course, it is also true that Kristeva had her issues with feminism. She is, in general, a little skeptical of "feminism as a mass movement"[5] and finds limited value in the kind of "short lived militantism" that ignores the singularity of subjects and attempts to "encompass all women, like all proletarians or the entire Third World, with demands as relentless as they are desperate."[6] This has certainly caused friction with some of her feminist colleagues and critics.[7] Nevertheless, there is no doubt at all that Beauvoir, like Arendt,

[3] Julia Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), xix.

[4] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xx.

[5] Kristeva, *Colette*, 404.

[6] Kristeva, *Colette*, 405.

[7] Christine Delphy, e.g., alleges that Kristeva "does not address the questions raised by

Klein, and Colette, captures Kristeva's imagination. She is the source of the kind of stimulating, suggestive ideas—not excluding feminist ideas—that Kristeva emphasizes in relation to all the female geniuses she describes.

Arguably, though, it would have been hard even for Kristeva to avoid the conclusion that Beauvoir exemplifies female genius as Kristeva defines it, most particularly with respect to her attempts to liberate women. Even beyond *The Second Sex* and its afterlives, Beauvoir developed models or illustrations of a kind of liberation for women as individuals with complex and singular lives. She did this most notably, of course, in *The Second Sex*, but even in her novels and in her literary representations of women and men she explores new ideas and ways of being—for herself of course but also for her readers, her students, and her friends. She models liberation by the very fact of presenting herself as a publishing female philosopher in conversation with other philosophers, as a writer, editor, and novelist.

So Beauvoir's *feminist* analysis must be an important starting point for Kristeva's work on female genius. One reason she adopts the term "female genius" is surely to assist women to make an equal claim to the idea of human subjectivity; contesting the normative view, her female genius is in no sense inferior to the male. She is interested in women and in defending a woman's right to be considered a female genius in a sense that is fully comparable with male genius and not simply some lesser complement or deviant imitation.

Of course, the masculine inference of "genius" still haunts her discussion of women's achievements. Take Kristeva's account, for example, of Alix Strachey's words, written to her husband in 1925 after meeting the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein for the first time: "She's a dotty woman. But there's no doubt whatever that her mind is stored with things of thrilling interest. And she's a nice character."[8] Strachey is not being catty. She is well inclined to Klein. She is not even saying that there is nothing to Klein but her dottiness. In fact, her mind is "stored with things of thrilling interest." Nonetheless, to call someone "dotty," however affectionately, is dismissive and invokes a very different notion of madness from the heroic, creative (masculine) madness of the genius revered by the whole of European tradition and not the least by the Romantics and their heirs. Strachey's choice of words might also suggest

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feminism because she does not know what they are." "The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move," *Yale French Studies* 87 (1995): 220.

[8] Julia Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 5.

that these things of thrilling interest need to be "stored," separated from the dotty woman herself, perhaps. And finally, of course, Strachey falls back on the kind of comment with which we are all familiar when trying to slip in a sneaky criticism of someone's professional reputation or competence: "she's a nice character." Together, these words suggest that Strachey is unsettled by the mismatch she perceives between Klein's reputation for creativity, imagination, and innovation and the fact that it is a woman rather than a man who takes the stage to speak about psychoanalysis.

In fact, these words form the opening of Kristeva's second volume in the trilogy, *Female Genius*. She provides no commentary, but it seems clear that they are meant to illustrate a typical reaction to Klein. In contrast to Strachey's description,[9] Kristeva herself goes on to describe Klein as someone as interested as the great psychoanalyst Freud was in understanding and liberating the human soul and thus as "a major figure of indisputable worth."[10]

Female genius as a concept derived from Kristeva's writing does not therefore exemplify a form of ideological feminism but is characterized by the ability to challenge existing assumptions, metaphors, and imaginaries, including feminist ones. And, of course, the influence of Beauvoir is plain to see in Kristeva's trilogy: the female genius refuses to be diverted from thinking up new ideas or creating fresh relationships merely in consideration of her (un)suitability as a woman.[11] It is therefore no surprise at all to find Kristeva's acknowledgement of the author of *The Second Sex*, a prime candidate for the title of genius if there ever was one.

Kristeva's idea of female genius is, therefore, in spite of certain reservations, clearly indebted to Beauvoir and to the forms of feminist theory she inspired. However, since Kristeva's female genius is also motivated by a concern to do justice to the subjectivity of singular women, regardless of whether they were familiar with modern forms of feminist analysis, it also has the potential to address the circumstances of women who have identified themselves in the past as Christians, and this makes the idea a particularly attractive theoretical tool for the purposes of this book. Of course, feminisms of all kinds have remained, by and large, suspicious of what they see as Christianity's murky relationship with forms of patriarchy. Fears about women

[9] Strachey later gave Klein English lessons and translated the lectures she gave in London that year. Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, 30.

[10] Kristeva, *Melanie Klein*, 6–7.

[11] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xix.

who have both literally and metaphorically "disappeared" have perhaps never been more poignantly expressed than in the poetry of Adrienne Rich when she described the world discovered by feminists as a wreck submerged in deep water, whose key was "a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear."[12] And both the Christian church and its texts have acquired a bad reputation as agents of this kind of disappearance.

Yet in the twenty-first century the uncovering of women's lives and work is now gathering pace, producing evidence not simply of their excision but also of their presence, voice, creativity, and even impact. This body of work about women has grown over the last few decades, largely as a result of feminist activism and scholarship. This has resulted in the potential polarization between an emphasis on critique and revision of patriarchal texts and structures, on the one hand, and reclamation and recovery of women's lives on equal terms with men, on the other. Kristeva's concept of female genius represents an approach that might genuinely help to resolve this tension, identifying and valorizing the work of historical women who might otherwise be found wanting merely because of their relationship with normative Christianity.

This is not at all to claim that, in some broadly evolutionary sense, things are getting better for women. The philosophical questions Beauvoir posed about the nature of "woman" remain as pressing as they ever were. It remains challenging for women to know who to be and how to respond to the normative male expectations most of them continue to encounter on a regular basis. At the same time, the wider discourse of subjectivity is constantly expanding to include new readings of gender beyond heteronormativity or humanism.[13]

In these sometimes confusing circumstances, reaching out for a riskier kind of subjectivity cannot always be easily distinguished from a reversion to older gendered forms of exploitation. Ariel Levy, for example, notes the struggle of some younger American women involved in what she calls "raunch culture" to become sex-positive on their own terms rather than simply to understand their own sexuality in the terms of an older generation whose circumstances and contexts were clearly different. Understandably, some younger women have rejected the extreme suspicion and hostility toward

[12] Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck," in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 55.

[13] See Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville, eds., *Bodily Citations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); and Andy Mousley, ed., *Towards a New Literary Humanism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

men and the masculine that was sometimes a characteristic of their mothers' and grandmothers' second-wave feminism. However, as she suggests in the book, what she calls raunch culture—a rebranding or disguising of predatory male-normative assumptions to make them seem accessible and attractive to younger and more vulnerable women—indicates the need for continual vigilance. Early second-wave feminism may have lacked subtlety in relation to heterosexual relationships, but this is not to say, for example, that Beauvoir's analysis is no longer relevant. Patriarchal assumptions and attitudes are resilient and capable of reinvention.[14] It can be hard, then, to identify what is empowering for any individual woman or to develop strategies and policies to establish what "women" are entitled to in general, and to have absolute confidence in the willingness or ability of any contemporary society to enact them. And yet, at the same time, knowing more about the past, we want to avoid collapsing back into the normative perspective Beauvoir identified. Even as we acknowledge the interventions of feminist scholarship and activism, we also want to be able to talk about—perhaps talk up—the achievements of women from the past or from within other apparently nonliberal contexts, rather than simply reducing them to silent victims. Kristeva's idea of female genius does not trivialize what it means for a women to live in a society in which the male is normative. More importantly, however, all three of her female geniuses exemplify Beauvoir's hope as a woman for something better,[15] illustrating a repertoire of desire, performance, and attainment to challenge the limits of normative male convention.

How, then, does this work out in more detail? First of all, Kristeva agrees with Beauvoir that the discussion must assume as its starting point that the idea of a female subject or subjectivity equal to a male subject or subjectivity makes sense. And this, of course, has been one of the biggest problems in the past. Beauvoir herself says that—in 1949—woman cannot create to the same end or on the same scale as man because she is still struggling against the odds to become a human being.[16] But Kristeva—looking backward as well as forward in time—is much more positive. She thinks a woman's struggle can be a successful and productive one; she is not totally convinced by Beauvoir's

[14] See Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (London: Pocket Books, 2006).

[15] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1972), 24.

[16] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 723.

pessimistic analysis of the past. For Kristeva, becoming someone[17]—taking a subject position or becoming a human being—is not some kind of preliminary process onto which genius is grafted. "The work of a genius culminates in the birth of a subject."[18] In other words, the process of becoming a subject or human being is *itself* a work of genius. Anyone, she says, may work, more or less successfully, to revive, to shock, or even to remake the human condition[19] and the genius may well come to our attention because of these things. However, it is not essentially by virtue of these accomplishments that Kristeva calls Arendt, Klein, and Colette female geniuses but by virtue of the fact that their work is the expression of a subject position, more or less established—a female subjectivity that is "in process." These subjects are characterized by singular affections, by desires, and by the challenges with which they have to engage. One of these is the very difficulty women face in achieving their status as subjects in contexts characterized by the normative privileges of men over women and the limitations they impose on her freedom to be creative—whether as a mother, a philosopher, a Christian, or anything else she desires to do or be.

Female genius, as Kristeva uses the term, is also a kind of uniqueness or singularity[20] that cannot be disassociated from being a woman at a particular time and place. Kristeva's three subjects are female geniuses because they have transcended and gone beyond what has already been thought or created in the fields of political philosophy, psychoanalysis, or literature and performance within which they have worked, not by excluding the effects of their female singularity—being women in the twentieth century in ways that address all the consequences of the corresponding masculine norm—but by doing this through the fullest exploration and fulfillment of their lives and desires as women. They invite others to tread the same path, not by bracketing off the unique factors of their lives as women—however that concept of "woman" might be understood—but by "following the[ir] battles and advances."[21]

However, though Kristeva might view Beauvoir as a female genius, Beauvoir herself had a problem with the idea, although she did not discount its future possibility. She allowed, for example, that it was not entirely a woman's fault that she could not carry the same burdens as men, who as she

[17] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xi.
[18] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, x.
[19] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xi; *Colette*, 407.
[20] Kristeva, *Colette*, 404.
[21] Kristeva, *Colette*, 404.

says "feel responsible for the universe."[22] It was because the whole of tradition was weighted in the past against her taking on this role. So Beauvoir looks primarily to the future to put things right, saying, "when woman's unmeasured bondage shall be broken, when she shall live for and through herself . . . she, too, will be poet!"[23] Clearly, though she wants women alongside men to be "honoured with the name of genius,"[24] she does not have the confidence to abandon this kind of prophetic vision and reach straight out for what she wants. For her, "the free woman is just being born,"[25] and, however good the cause, some element of doubt remains. And, in looking into her life and work, it is clear that she is herself held back by assumptions about genius characteristic of a normatively male, French, mid-twentieth-century mindset.

We have already looked at Beauvoir's inability to distance herself entirely from the sexism of the European, Romantic tradition about genius, and it is again illustrated, for example, in the way in which she discounts Proust's "psychophysiological disequilibrium" as any kind of bar to genius, while being ugly (Rosa Luxemburg) or living in the country (Emily Brontë) seem, in her view, quite enough to isolate and thus disqualify a woman[26] from being given the same title. It can be argued, easily enough here, that she continues to look for genius within a range of dispositions and situations that are still intensely and conventionally masculine.

Kristeva, however, addresses this head on in *Female Genius.* She challenges what she sees as Beauvoir's grandiose, heroic, and normatively male descriptions of geniuses as "those who have proposed to enact the fate of all humanity in their personal existences"[27] and her utopian idealizations of female emancipation.[28] With a touch of irony—drawing on her reading of what she sees Beauvoir to be implying rather than actually saying, Kristeva makes her "more modest"[29] proposal that the achievement of a subject position is itself female genius. Rather than imagining the conditions in which women live their lives as merely a matter of constraints—preventing her from being

[22] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 722.
[23] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 723.
[24] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 722.
[25] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 723.
[26] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 723.
[27] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 722.
[28] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 724.
[29] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, x.

sent, like Van Gogh, for example, on an heroic mission to the Belgian coal mines in order to experience the miners' misery as "her own crime"[30]—Kristeva expands the scope of the term genius to accommodate activities women commonly do as women as well as the endeavors in which they might engage more exceptionally, that is when they are generally compared—unfavorably or with disquiet—to men. Thus she brings into view the kinds of achievements, previously dismissed as too constrained, too feminine, and therefore too subjective, in the limited and blinkered sense of the term, to be considered within the context of genius. She knows, for example, that women's accomplishments have been trivialized in the past.[31] Typically drawing on her own life experience,[32] Kristeva gives the reader of *Hannah Arendt* an example of female genius in the context of those who judge a woman's choice to be a mother: "That approach to being a mother and a woman, at times warmly accepted and at times outright refused or wrought with conflict, bestows upon mothers a genius all their own."[33] In this way, bringing motherhood into the context of genius is no longer a problem in a way that it undoubtedly would have been for Beauvoir, who was notoriously ambivalent about motherhood.

Kristeva accepts Beauvoir's feminist analysis in the main. For example, she fully accepts that being "the birthing half of a species of mammals" has been highly problematic for women[34] and does not argue with Beauvoir's view that "one is not born a woman: one becomes one."[35] Yet she believes the earlier approach is limited, particularly insofar as it seems to suggest that women—especially those in the past—are simply trapped within the masculine imaginary without scope to flourish individually or to bring about any transformation at any level: "Beauvoir did not allow herself to go any further with the existentialist project (though she anticipated the move), which ought to have led her to meditate, on the basis of the condition of women in the plural, on the opportunities for freedom on the part of each

[30] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 722. See also Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Women's Press, 1989), 150–54.

[31] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xii.

[32] Kathleen O'Grady, "The Tower and the Chalice: Julia Kristeva and the Story of Santa Barbara," in *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady, and Judith L. Poxon (London: Routledge, 2003), 96.

[33] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xv.

[34] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xii.

[35] Kristeva, *Colette*, 405.

one as singular human being."[36] Indeed, Kristeva takes some exception to the way in which Beauvoir draws on the accomplishments of singular subjects—individual women like St. Theresa and Colette, for example, whom Kristeva regards as "exemplary in their genius"—to make her case about the female condition while failing to acknowledge what these women have actually achieved as singular subjects in circumstances limited by patriarchal structures and masculinist values. Beauvoir, she says, ignores the possibility of "the free realization of every woman" or "individual autonomy and feminine creativity,"[37] laying no store by their singular achievements even when she notes them. Beauvoir is also perhaps—though Kristeva does not say so in so many words—a little too ready to adopt the reductionist reading of Marxist theory that simply identifies the weakness of women's position with the fact that they are "dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition and social standing to certain men" and unable to assume the "we" meaning "we women" or this class of women.[38]

However, Kristeva clearly neither wants nor indeed ought to be too critical of the earlier philosopher. In terms of her understanding of female genius, Beauvoir's choices, like Arendt's, Klein's, and Colette's, reflect the singularity of her situation as a woman in twentieth-century France, affording their own particular opportunities and limitations. In Beauvoir's case, at least two key events or sets of circumstances led, for example, to greater freedom of choice for women, so that, unlike her mother and grandmother, she found sufficient encouragement to study and go to university; these were first-wave feminism and two world wars. But, of course, the point of the female genius is not her interest or involvement with feminism but her attitude toward the life in which she finds herself.[39] As Kristeva reflects, "Arendt, Klein, Colette—and so many others—did not wait for the 'female condition' to evolve in order to realize their freedom: is not 'genius' precisely that breach through and beyond the 'situation'?"[40] Against the background of many kinds of limitations including those of a patriarchal society, Arendt, Klein, and Colette found ways in which to manifest "their freedom to explore without heeding the dominant trends, institutions, parties or schools of thought."[41]

[36] Kristeva, *Colette*, 406.
[37] Kristeva, *Colette*, 406.
[38] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 19.
[39] Kristeva, *Colette*, 407.
[40] Kristeva, *Colette*, 406–7.
[41] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xix.

In other words, Kristeva is more interested in the question of how women wrestle with their own circumstances and often find that wrestling fulfilling. Beauvoir's powerful feminist analysis, with its sometimes stark picture of female complicity with and entrapment within a masculine world, cannot be the final word, however important it has been as a means of comprehending the situation of gender inequality. Making reference to Arendt, Klein, and Colette again, Kristeva says,

> To appeal to the genius of every woman . . . is a way not of underestimating the weight of History—these three women, better and to a greater extent than others, confronted it and jostled it, courageously and realistically—but of attempting to free the female condition, like the human condition in general, from biological, social or fateful constraints by emphasizing the conscious or unconscious initiative of the subject against the weightiness of its program, dictated by these various forms of determinism.

Might not the singular initiative be, in the end, that intimate infinitesimal but ultimate force on which the deconstruction of any "condition" depends?[42]

Kristeva is generally optimistic—some may think her overly optimistic—in suggesting that women are slowly being freed from the constraints of the life cycle[43] so as to play an increasing role, for example, in politics and economics. But perhaps the key point for her is that, in the end, the question of establishing subjectivity—establishing the female subject as embodied, thinking, speaking, desiring, and, as such, free and autonomous, neither the object of a male perspective nor its defining otherness but asking questions about what actually constitutes "woman"—is even more fundamental than the practical political issue of equality. And in this, she claims Beauvoir's support: "Even while struggling against women's reduction to biology alone . . . Simone de Beauvoir was in reality still fuming against metaphysics, since it confined woman within the *other*, in order to posit her as *facticity* and *immanence* and to refuse her access to true humanity, the humanity of autonomy and freedom."[44] Kristeva's definition of "female genius"—in relation to Beauvoir's equally fundamental concern with female subjectivity—should now be clearer: female genius is a question, first and foremost, of a woman being able to establish subjectivity as someone who perceives and thinks and creates and wrestles, rather than simply being in every context, the object

[42] Kristeva, *Colette*, 407.
[43] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xii.
[44] Kristeva, *Colette*, 405; emphasis in original.

perceived, thought about, or created to satisfy someone else's desires. It is about widening the scope of what counts as *genius*, and thus as worth or value, to go beyond that perspective in order to include all the experiences, skills, and achievements of women that would previously have simply been excluded because of the perception that no woman could attain genius on the same level as a man.

Kristeva's idea of female genius is central to this study because it allows us to talk about the achievement of genuine female subjectivity even within contexts limited by structures and values that belong to a normative male view of the world. And, arguably, it is compatible with the trajectory of modern feminist analysis without compounding any simplistically smoothed-over view of women's progress.

Female Genius and Psychoanalysis

Since the mid-1960s, Kristeva's work has been strongly informed by psychoanalysis. The theoretical term female genius is no exception, and it is perhaps important to clarify the ways in which it is related to psychoanalysis, particularly since from a feminist perspective this has sometimes been seen as contentious.

In theorizing female genius, then, Kristeva draws on her psycholinguistic account of the "subject in process" and particularly on her idea of the semiotic, which is associated closely with the maternal body and a birthing role. For Kristeva, the semiotic is a form of signification bound up with the libidinal investment of gestures, colors, phonic entities, or other sensory, rhythmic constituents (to which she gives the name *chora*) of our earliest experiences. The semiotic has multiple points of reference, not all of them identified with early infancy—a time before speech, but sometimes with the purely visual imagery of dreams[45] and crucially with poetic language, particularly the unsettling, exciting, disturbing language of poetry and literature called "avant-garde"—and the maternal body itself. She claims that these semi- or nonlinguistic perceptions are mediated when we are infants, on the one hand through maternal love, which settles us in our absorption with the body and its pleasurable energies, and, on the other hand, through maternal abjection, which is a visceral revolt or turning away from that body or absorption with

[45] Cecilia Sjöholm, *Kristeva & the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 23–25.

it[46] brought about in the dawning of a sense of who "I" am, derived from negation: "I" am "not this" (breast, milk, feces, etc.). The oscillation both toward and away from the maternal body becomes, in Kristeva's theoretical unpacking of the "subject in process," both the framework and the dynamic of our later lives as complex speaking and thinking subjects. In other words, we are born and continually renewed as subjects in process as a result of an "impossible dialectics"[47] between pleasurable absorption in affective embodiment and a form of negativity or revolt from it—something Kristeva might also describe as a strangeness to ourselves. The semiotic oscillation creates something akin to a semiporous membrane separating yet connecting unrepresentable bodily experience to forms of representation in language and writing. Its origins and energies derive from our relationship to the (maternal) body, yet, at the same time, it constitutes us as speaking, thinking beings.

By drawing what amounts to a kind of analogy, Kristeva aligns the semiotic within the subject in process and with female genius understood as a kind of maternal role in its dual modes of love and abjection. Cecilia Sjöholm suggests that whereas Beauvoir had complained of "culture's destruction of female genius and the incapacity of women to transcend their corporeal position . . . Kristeva places the idea of genius not in transcendence but in affirmation of the maternal position, situated between nature and culture."[48]

It is important to stress here that the achievement of subjectivity as female genius should not be understood in polarized terms as the inarticulate affect or undirected energy that must be subjected to some kind of absolutely paternal and prohibitive understanding of law and language. The female genius, like the semiotic, is invested in the complex processes of symbolization as a whole. Above all else, and typically in language, the semiotic *connects* body and mind, sexuality and thought, politics and pleasure, affect and representation. In other words, Kristeva's insightful reference to the semiotic in the context of female genius indicates her concern with a resistance related to the maternal role, not a resistance that is somehow exiled outside of language and culture, but rather one that is a dimension of the signifying process itself: "It is not a murky undercurrent of language, but an aspect of it."[49]

[46] Sjöholm, *Kristeva & the Political*, 20–21.
[47] Sjöholm, *Kristeva & the Political*, 50.
[48] Sjöholm, *Kristeva & the Political*, 57.
[49] Sjöholm, *Kristeva & the Political*, 22.

Kristeva's reliance on psycholinguistic categories has sometimes come in for criticism. Judith Butler, for example, would no doubt claim that she is still, in her insistence on the whole Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalytical discourse, propping up the hegemony and the heteronormativity of the paternal law,[50] shoring up an idea of primary sexual difference and normative patterns of social and sexual relations. However, in speaking of femininity as maternal, she does not attempt to identify women with motherhood or with anything outside language and culture with their paternal/patriarchal indices. As mothers, she thinks women can be geniuses "of love, tact, self-denial, suffering and even evil spells and witchcraft,"[51] but as women they are able to contribute something more or besides this, sharing in the creativity of Arendt's concept of "natality"—which includes birth, life, and the life of the mind[52]—or, just as much, the resistant immodesty of Colette's writing about exploring the pleasures of women.[53]

It is also possible that Kristeva's critics fail to appreciate fully how Kristeva's concept of the semiotic remains part of a broader theoretical supposition associated with the transformative powers of signification within literature and theoretical writing.[54] In other words, the psycholinguistic framework reflects not only her view of the subject in process straddling a division between categories of "nature and culture" but also her faith in forms of negativity, revolt, and contestation—also associated with the semiotic—across the board.

As an interesting footnote to this discussion of Kristeva's psycholinguistic model of the subject, Roland Boer suggests that, in spite of her apparent devotion to psychoanalysis,[55] Kristeva is actually more motivated overall by a "repressed Marxism."[56] Applying this insight to her view of female genius, then, it might be equally well understood in relation to the theme of revolution.[57] Certainly, Kristeva figures the female genius as a singular subject

[50] See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 103.

[51] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xv.

[52] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xv, 239.

[53] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xv–xvi.

[54] Sjöholm, *Kristeva & the Political*, 18.

[55] Roland Boer, "Julia Kristeva, Marx and the Singularity of Paul," in *Marxist Feminist Criticism of the Bible*, eds. Roland Boer and Joruun Økland (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008), 223.

[56] Boer, "Julia Kristeva, Marx and the Singularity of Paul," 222.

[57] Boer, "Julia Kristeva, Marx and the Singularity of Paul," 217.

who might well—as Arendt, Klein, and Colette did—take up the initiative "against the weightiness of [their] program."[58] And it is true that "revolution" or "revolt" figure more broadly as an important theme across Kristeva's work as a whole, tracked from at least as early as the publication of her doctoral thesis *Revolution in Poetic Language* in 1974 and linked to a whole series of more recent works including *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (1996), *Intimate Revolt* (1997), and *Revolt, She Said* (2002), not excluding the trilogy *Female Genius: Life, Madness, Words* (1999–2002).

Kristeva explained the idea of "liberty-as-revolt"[59] very clearly in 2002: human beings need to question continually and thus "revolt against" the structures in their lives, "because it's precisely by putting things into question that 'values' stop being frozen dividends and acquire a sense of mobility, polyvalence and life."[60] There is also a connection between revolt or revolution and the transformative powers of signification within literature and theoretical writing.[61]

Of course, in her trilogy as in all these previous works, Kristeva is careful to distinguish revolution from that which merely "confronts a Norm and transgresses it by a promise of paradise."[62] The sort of revolution she envisages is more like an ongoing, energetic review based on a "deep sense of self-questioning and questioning tradition."[63] In an interview with Ranier Ganahl in the 1990s, for example, she expanded on the term in this way:

[58] Kristeva, *Colette*, 407. In contrast, Saba Mahmood, e.g., attempts to explain the concept of "agency" as a project or key dimension of women's subjectivity in an Egyptian Muslim context, by making the bold move of refusing to equate it with this kind of "resistance to social norms" ("Agency, Performativity and the Feminist Subject," in *Bodily Citations*, ed. Ellen T. Armour and Susan M. St. Ville [New York: Columbia University Press, 2006], 195). The move to detach "the concept of agency from the trope of resistance" (180) is a bold one, because the idea of agency as resistance to male norms has acquired the status of a feminist given in most Western contexts. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler, however, Mahmood structures agency in terms of bodily practices that she sees as establishing a certain modality of action that cannot be fully described either in terms of conformity to masculinist forms of oppression or of resistance to them. These performances—practices of Muslim piety adopted by the "mosque movement" women in Egypt, such as shyness (*al-ḥayā'*), modesty, and wearing the veil (*hijab*)—actively and positively evade the grasp of such frameworks in Mahmood's view.

[59] Julia Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*, trans. Brian O'Keeffe (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2002), 14.

[60] Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*, 12.

[61] Sjöholm, *Kristeva & the Political*, 18.

[62] Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*, 85.

[63] Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*, 85.

> The word revolt comes from a Sanskrit root that means to discover, open, but also to turn, to return. This meaning also refers to the revolution of the earth around the sun, for example. It has an astronomical meaning, the eternal return. On a more philosophical level, since Plato, through St. Augustine and until Hegel and Nietzsche, there is a meaning that I wanted to rehabilitate and that you would find equally rehabilitated by Freud and Proust. It is the idea that being is within us and that the truth can be acquired by a retrospective return, by anamnesis, by memory.[64]

In other words, she uses "revolution" as a term for the sort of relentless scrutiny that will foster a resilient, authoritative subjectivity or subject position from which a woman might be capable of resisting totalitarianisms or other forms of tyranny[65] but that marks no final or closed-off definition or destination because of the dialectical motion it implies.

What is also very important about this "revolutionary" thinking that demands such uncompromising and continuous self-reflection is that it presents "revolution" as a pathway toward a quality of life or lifestyle that reflects real human desires, pleasures, and happiness and not merely those authorized or allowed by particular ideologies. Her thinking in this respect clearly owes a debt to a Hegelian form of negativity whereby the revolutionary moves away from the political, intellectual, or conventional framings of the past while observing their ability in a lively dialectic to continue to generate new questions and thus movement.

It might also be helpful, finally and briefly in this section about the psycholinguistic context of female genius, to examine the implications of the term "female" in female genius. Is female genius something essentially feminine or something only a woman could possess? And are we in any danger, if we use this term, of essentializing women and the feminine or laying female difference open once again to all of the kinds of reductionism—biological, Christian, psychoanalytical—Beauvoir fought to expose?

Kristeva's approach is slightly ambiguous on this score, although, as I have already argued, not in such a way as to compromise fatally its use for the purposes intended here. At the end of volume 3, Kristeva herself returns to this question of female specificity, one she had already posed at the beginning of volume 1: "Do we owe these uncommon forms of genius and these unforgettable innovations to these women's femininity,"[66] whatever that

[64] Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*, 100.
[65] Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*, 86, 91.
[66] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xx.

might be?[67] Certainly the hypothesis of the feminine she lays out at the end of volume 3 is not fundamentally essentialist in its approach to gender, and, though she makes reference, for example, to the primacy of the male signifier, the phallus, in all (male and female) children's psychosexual development,[68] it functions to indicate that in this important respect all children are the same.

Having said this, gender is locked into the way in which the subject—in her terminology, the speaking subject or the subject in process—develops in such a way and at such a time in the human life cycle—the child's first interactions with its mother[69]—that it is not easily dismantled. Kristeva as both theorist and analyst seems attached to the idea that there is something special or different about the relationship between the mother and the little girl which distinguishes the earliest investments the child makes in response to her own "excitable body." It is also something she seems keen to authenticate in relation to the work of the founding figures of psychoanalysis—Freud and Lacan—who were, according to her, aware of this difference even if they were not especially interested in it.[70]

For Kristeva, then, female subjectivity does appear to be in some sense different. This difference is characterized by something male subjectivity lacks, but, because of the primacy of the phallic order of language and symbolism, that something cannot be registered through language. Of course, this difference is still registered nonetheless, in "*radical strangeness*, constitutive exclusion, irreparable solitude."[71] However, once she has analyzed the feminine in this way, it does not seem to be altogether clear whether or how the women she has defined as female geniuses take this strangeness or difference into account in achieving subjectivity or whether, indeed, to the contrary, they are able to detach themselves from or discount it.[72]

Perhaps the point is to account this generally effective—though not technically absolute—distinction between males and females as part of the set of circumstances within which women actually live their lives. And, of course, Kristeva indicates in her essays on female genius that, although gender presents women with challenges, these limitations are not necessarily or in all

[67] Kristeva *Colette*, 408.
[68] Kristeva *Colette*, 409.
[69] Kristeva, *Colette*, 409–10.
[70] Kristeva, *Colette*, 409.
[71] Kristeva, *Colette*, 416. Emphasis in original.
[72] Kristeva, *Colette*, 419.

cases a barrier to the achievement of subjectivity on equal terms with the male genius[73] who is, of course, also limited by his singular circumstances.

Kristeva's concern with female specificity may lie ultimately in the way in which she avoids identifying the idea of female genius—the ongoing achievement of female subjectivity—with any final transcendence of the (feminine-identified) body. In fact, she places it in an affirmative relationship to the maternal body that literally and metaphorically gives birth to every (female or male) subject.[74] In this way, she avoids miming the strategies of the normative male, who defines himself by exclusion of the (female) other.

In the end, this psycholinguistic model of female subjectivity "places a heterogeneous foundation at the heart of subjectivity and language operation, a structuration which makes of *any* individual a stranger in a strange land."[75] In other words, feminine "strangeness" is a constituent and creative element of all subjectivity, both female and male. At the heart of Kristeva's psycholinguistic account of the speaking subject, then, gender is reread against malestream Western tradition as dynamic heterogeneity rather than as gendered hierarchy.

Back to the Definition of Female Genius

Without finally resolving the issue of female specificity in this psychoanalytical register—though of course, as the title of the trilogy suggests, Kristeva clearly does believe her female geniuses produce their "unforgettable innovations" without seeking to abandon their femininity[76]—she sets out a perhaps more straightforward definition of the female genius at the end of the third volume. This identifies what she believes the three women all share "beyond the incommensurable differences and originality of their three bodies of work."[77]

Implicit within the description of these traits or characteristics of female genius is a much wider range of activities or modes of being, including elements of embodiment and female desire, that are usually left out of normatively masculine accounts of genius, excepting, of course, those elements of feminine sensibility co-opted exclusively for men within the masculine genius of European Romanticism. Women are female geniuses, then, because

[73] Kristeva, *Colette*, 407.
[74] Sjöholm, *Kristeva & the Political*, 57.
[75] O'Grady, "Tower and the Chalice," 92. Emphasis added.
[76] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xx.
[77] Kristeva, *Colette,* 419.

they are artists, writers, and human beings alongside men and in their own right and not through the conventional exclusion, for example, of their specifically maternal emotions or their female desires. This definition of female genius opens up the field of possibilities to many women, both living and dead, who have been geniuses in every context, not excluding those associated with women.

Kristeva distinguishes three characteristics in particular that she associates with Arendt, Klein, and Colette. These relate, first, to the formative role of the female genius' various relationships,[78] then to the need to "[tend] to the capacity for thought,"[79] and finally to a facility for birth or rebirth in the sense of bringing about new beginnings.[80] To unpack these three characteristics a little more, they are a focus on relationships—on the genius as an innovator in terms of political, psychical, or sexual relationships as opposed to the peerless male genius working in splendid isolation; a focus on thought and the capacity to think—"all three identify life and thought with each other, to the point of achieving that extreme bliss where *to live is to think-sublimate-write*";[81] and a focus on birth or rebirth—as an ontological foundation,[82] as a therapeutic goal,[83] or as an inspiration for writing.[84]

Coming into focus in Kristeva's work on three twentieth-century women, the idea of female genius can be seen, then, as a form of creative transformation of the past in relation to female subjectivity which is expressed through thinking, writing, speaking, changing the worlds in which we live, and even motherhood—something previously regarded as unworthy of the honor of genius in anything approaching the sense associated with men. Kristeva describes this female genius as creative not in spite of her body and entanglement with sexuality—traditionally a bar to disembodied masculine genius—but precisely because this maternal position gives birth to an intellectual creativity that is also rooted in embodiment and recognized as such. The female genius expresses through her female subjectivity a passionate curiosity, a refusal to be contained within conventional relationships, and a capacity for new connections and innovative relations. None of this is achieved easily

[78] Kristeva, *Colette,* 420.
[79] Kristeva, *Colette,* 421.
[80] Kristeva, *Colette,* 422–23.
[81] Kristeva, *Colette,* 422. Emphasis in original.
[82] Kristeva, *Colette,* 422–23.
[83] Kristeva, *Colette,* 423–24.
[84] Kristeva, *Colette,* 424.

or without personal cost: "rebels glean their stimulation from their genius, and they pay for it by being ostracized, misunderstood and disdained."[85] The female genius then provides us with the means to take up Christine Battersby's claim that women are not "insignificant zeros" or the deadwood of history and to research the stories of women, including Christian women, confident that what we will find is that some of them—or perhaps, most of them in some ways—will refuse to conform to conventions of silent exclusion and in some way will be able to transform all kinds of disembodied masculine transcendence, including Christian patriarchal understandings of divinity and ecclesiastical authority. Once again it is apparent that female genius is something that can be achieved in the pleasures of dialogue with these problematic structures as much as through straightforward repudiation.

In conclusion, the female genius defined by Kristeva is someone who activates the complex interrelationship of affectivity, embodiment, and representation in order to unlock her own unique potential. She does this not by becoming reified in herself as one representation of a quasi-divine or transcendent idealization of creativity[86] but by the exercise of her own ambition or curiosity, pursuing the pleasures of sometimes divergent speech, writing, and interpretation in a singular life. Kristeva continues to take for granted that political and cultural systems will continue to determine women's lives,[87] but she opens up the possibility that female genius may also be about an effective resistance to conformities of all kinds, the capacity to invent or imagine something new, piece by piece, from personal memory, inventing words or theories out of embodied, material, day-to-day circumstances.

Writing about the specific experience of three women who challenge inherited cultural, social, and intellectual limitations, Kristeva also sees female genius as "a therapeutic invention that keeps us from dying from equality in a world without a hereafter,"[88] by which she intends to critique not ideas of equality as between women and men but the sameness of the "society of the spectacle."[89] This is an aspect of modern capitalist economies that

[85] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xix.

[86] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, 98–99.

[87] "We still must acknowledge that, no matter how far science may progress, women will continue to be the mothers of humanity. Through their love of men, too, women will continue to give birth to children. That fate, though tempered by various techniques and by a sense of solidarity, will remain an all-consuming and irreplaceable vocation." Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xiv.

[88] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, x.

[89] Kristeva's use of the phrase "the society of the spectacle" refers to the work of filmmaker and Situationist intellectual Guy Debord, who published *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967.

saturates our experience with a kind of deadening uniformity that, Kristeva implies, the female genius will always resist. This kind of uniformity is constituted through all sorts of banal images, from fast food chains advertising "home cooking" to TV "cop" dramas dealing in low-level sadistic excitement. These are forms of representation that deliver nothing more than a superficial appeasement. They cannot prompt people to make the kind of effort in terms of effective representation or interpretation that Kristeva believes can deliver the deeper kinds of satisfaction for which the female genius, for one, is searching. The ambition of the female genius is nothing less than to remake the human condition, not in relation to idealizations—disembodied divinities and totalitarian ideologies—so much as in a constant interrogation of the way we live now in conditions of embodiment and materiality.

This may not lead to fame or public influence; what female genius describes will oftentimes not be recognized in the academy, the church, government, publishing, or medicine. When it comes to the ideological contextualization of history or memory, it is still possible that, even if people see them, the female genius' questioning, challenging gestures will be misread as obscene, trivial, or inconsequential. Nevertheless, the implication is clear: as a result of its undaunted curiosity and rebellious resistance, female genius has the capacity to bring about significant transformations—including, for example, changing the way in which we understand what it means to be female.

As public events, Kristeva's studies of female genius also function themselves as part of the process of feminist reclamation, reconstruction, and rebirth.[90] And she therefore sees the work—her own and that of other scholars, researchers, and female geniuses—as a kind of encouragement, prompting women to envisage more confidently something better and to imagine rebellious resistance fruitfully at work throughout history or in other places out of the limelight or in ways as yet untraced.

The stories of Klein, Arendt, and Colette build into a narrative of creative dialogue with limitations in twentieth-century philosophy, psychoanalysis,

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See Alison Jasper, "Revolting Fantasies: Reviewing the Cinematic Image as Fruitful Ground for Creative, Theological Interpretations in the Company of Julia Kristeva," in *Theology And Literature: Rethinking Reader Responsibility*, ed. Gaye Williams Ortiz and Clara A. B. Joseph (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 212n7.

[90] With no lack of confidence, Kristeva describes how she has been able because of her own singularity—and perhaps she also would not entirely resist the description of female genius—because she is herself and specifically herself, to "introduce the contributions of women to a large segment of the world." Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xiv.

and literature. Women, from their veiled or marginal standpoints, see what is invisible from the center and make connections impossible to others more strategically placed. It is arguable, for example, that Klein extrapolated her innovative approach to psychoanalysis at least partly from observing and enjoying the pleasures of motherhood herself. Arguably her genius lay in recognizing and energetically contesting that this was significant, not "neutral" or "irrelevant" or a specialist, domestic branch of knowledge but a source and ground for challenging the prevailing psychoanalytical orthodoxies of her day.[91]

To summarize so far: Kristeva allows us to see through her idea of female genius that women can think not simply by ignoring or bracketing off their bodies and entanglement with sexuality but precisely through this maternal position that then brings with it new creative possibilities. This theoretical tool gives us the means to explore the evidence of women in the past who, rebellious and resolute, refused to give up on the pleasures and ambitions of singular lives and lived sometimes in response to a specifically Christian vocation. They challenge us continually to make the effort to remember—or if necessary to invent the idea[92]—that women have not simply been insignificant, inessential, or, at best, secondary but may legitimately claim a form of creativity that challenges and wrestles with received ideas both of woman and of divinity as a (distinctly masculine) transcendence. The achievement of ongoing subjectivity that is the aim of female genius is inextricably bound up with the feminine identification of the body's motions and drives but also tends to the capacity for thought and can find expression through the pleasures and pains of bringing into being children, relationships, language, and other forms of symbolic representation from parkour, pantomime, and psychotherapy to set theory or econometrics. The birth or rebirth of insights, motions, and movements this generates may indeed change worlds—as Beauvoir's insights have changed worlds—or, no less significantly, it may transform a single life, that of the female genius herself.

[91] "Caring for children had taught [Melanie Klein] that in the beginning is the urge to destroy, an urge that eventually is transformed into madness but that always remains a conduit of desire. Freud had always said as much, but it was Klein who fully developed the notion." Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, xviii.

[92] The reference in this text is to Monique Wittig's lesbian/feminist utopian *Les Guérillières*: "But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent." Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillières*, trans. David Le Vay (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 89.

Finally, the Question of Female Genius and Christianity

What then, finally, can be said about the usefulness of Kristeva's idea of female genius as a means of talking up or talking about the subjectivity of women who have identified themselves as Christians? Feminism after Beauvoir revealed Christianity's highly complex and compromised relationship with the patriarchal cultures of the Western world, and certainly Kristeva would not herself claim to be a Christian. In fact, she sees atheism as the natural choice for women. None of the three female geniuses about whom she writes in her trilogy on the subject would claim to be Christians either.

However, it is also true that the kind of atheism Kristeva favors differs radically from the kind of antagonistic atheism proposed, for example, by scientist and New Atheist[93] Richard Dawkins. Dawkins and New Atheism seek to liberate readers and audiences from the pernicious influence of Christianity by encouraging them to engage in rational discussion based on forms of knowledge made available through developments in science.[94] Kristeva also wants to encourage people to think, of course, but she is arguably less concerned with forms of knowledge in themselves (justified or erroneous beliefs, for example). What interests her is the nature of the knowing and thinking subject or how that subjectivity is achieved and supported in conditions that can often be extremely challenging. She would no doubt agree with Dawkins that we cannot use inherited Christian language in the same way that the Europeans of premodernity used it, but, in other ways, her approach to Christianity is subtler and much more sympathetic.

For example, she is horrified by the "nihilistic atheism" or "atheism at all costs" she associates with the ideological socialism of the former Soviet Union, which she thinks resulted in a catastrophic and systematic failure of human compassion.[95] Though she has no faith in transcendent divinities—picking up here on the more standard feminist argument against patriarchal structures that exclude women and the feminine—her kind of atheism is not "secularism, understood as a battle against religion" but something she claims to be

[93] The New Atheists are a group of academics and journalists writing in English who have published a number of books since 2006 and who seek actively to oppose the influence of Christianity and other ideas and beliefs they categorize as "religious." Key figures among the group are Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, A. C. Grayling, and Richard Dawkins.

[94] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Black Swan, 2007), 22.

[95] See Julia Kristeva, *La haine et le pardon* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 2005), 413.

more sober; that is, "the resorption of the sacred into the tenderness of the connection to the other." This makes her much more ready, for example, to see the positive side of the Christian imagery of the Virgin Mary in which the feminine and maternal have clearly been able to play some role in our Western tradition,[96] however conflicted. As Catherine Clément writes to Kristeva—in some exasperation—"How many more letters will there be on the subject of the Virgin, Julia? I understood the lesson: without her, Eros would not have had right of citizenship in the Christian world, of women either."[97]

Of course, motherhood and the maternal represent a debated area of Kristeva's work overall. There are, nevertheless, differences of emphasis in her treatment of the theme from her earliest essays in psycholinguistics through works such as *Powers of Horror* (1980) and *Black Sun* (1987), where she creates her perhaps most well-known or contentious configurations of the maternal as *semiotic*, *chora*, *abject*, *murder victim*, or *stranger*—and the form of the maternal that is celebrated in and through the idea of female genius,[98] where she presents motherhood as "the most essential of the female vocations,"[99] though she does not use this perception to suggest that all women should aspire to embody it as actual biological mothers. In any event, she clearly continues to find Christianity's—especially Roman Catholicism's—emphasis on the maternal body of Mary evocative, however complex and troubling that virginal maternal body may be.

This concern with the maternal body is only one of a number of themes—albeit an important one—that resonate with Christianity. Another example would be her essay *In the Beginning was Love* (1985), in which she interprets love in the analyst's work of transference and countertransference in terms reminiscent of the Christian ethic of *agape* or self-giving love.

Of course, even this qualified appreciation of Christian imagery and language—that O'Grady attributes to the fact that Kristeva was not born in Beauvoir's twentieth-century France but raised by parents and teachers who were either Orthodox or Roman Catholic Christians in Bulgaria under a communist government—is enough to irritate yet another contingent of Kristeva's feminist colleagues and critics.[100] Of course, though Catherine

[96] Catherine Clément and Julia Kristeva, eds., *The Feminine and the Sacred*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 60.

[97] Clément and Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, 120.

[98] Sjöholm, *Kristeva & the Political*, 50.

[99] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt,* xiii.

[100] O'Grady, "Tower and the Chalice," 86–88.

Clément, for example, calls her "a Christian atheist,"[101] Kristeva does not endorse any form of Christianity. Perhaps the best way to describe her position is to say that she shares the idea, drawn ultimately from the work of Freud, that if Christianity must now be described as an illusion of some kind, then it is rich in significance and should not, by any means, be dismissed, as Dawkins, for example, would have it, as delusional.[102]

Nevertheless, from the perspective of this book, her sensitivity to the Christian resonances of the Western tradition does make her concept of female genius all the more appealing as a theoretical tool for the researcher who is interested in the subjectivity of contemporary and historical women who can be said to have achieved that subjectivity by engaging in dialogue with a more or less normative Christian imaginary once again, tempering the pain of limitation and loss with the profound pleasures of writing when more straightforward repudiation is impossible.

[101] Clément and Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*, 105.
[102] See Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 47–53.

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PART II

4

Jane Leade

Behold I am God's Eternal Virgin-Wisdom, whom thou has been enquiring after; I am to unseal the Treasures of God's deep Wisdom unto thee, and will be as Rebecca was unto Jacob, a true Natural Mother; for out of my Womb thou shalt be brought forth after the manner of a Spirit, Conceived and Born again.

—Jane Leade, *A Garden of Fountains*

General Introduction

Four women's lives and work form the centerpiece of this book. The first of the four women is Jane Leade, who was born in Norfolk in 1624. Leade has been described as a mystic and visionary.[1] Her visionary writing is poetic, employing a striking literary style and a range of elaborate images and metaphors, including many references to the figure of Wisdom, the female personification of God's creativity who figured little in mainstream Christianity at the time. In old age Leade became a prolific publisher of spiritual writings and the acknowledged leader of the Philadelphians,[2] a society that met in

[1] See Julie Hirst, *Jane Leade: Biography of a Seventeenth-Century Mystic* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005); and Nigel Smith, "Pregnant Dreams in Early Modern Europe: The Philadelphian Example," in *The Intellectual Culture of Puritan Women, 1558–1680*, ed. Johanna Harris and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 190–201.

[2] Named after the sixth of the seven churches in Revelation (3:7-13) which has "but little power and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name."

London for worship and reflection and included both men and women in its leadership.

The second woman, Hannah More, was born in Gloucestershire in 1745. Though politically and theologically far more conservative than her contemporary Mary Wollstonecraft, renowned champion of the rights of women,[3] More was no less concerned than Wollstonecraft with promoting women and girls as serious, rational individuals who could wield considerable power and influence. The duties and dispositions required by her evangelical faith strike the modern liberal feminist reader as restrictive. However, More was a passionate and intelligent woman who sought with extraordinary energy and determination to pursue her own careers as writer, abolitionist campaigner, and Christian social reformer. Her writing was influential in framing a publicly acknowledged role for women—especially of the middle and upper classes— in relation to spiritual leadership and social responsibility.

The third woman, Maude Royden, was born in Liverpool in 1876. While she is an heir to More's notions of spiritual womanhood[4] within the established Church of England, Royden speaks in a much more recognizably feminist voice. Taking an active role in the suffragist campaigns in the early years of the twentieth century, she turned her attention to the Anglican Church after the First World War. She was a gifted speaker and preacher and became a controversial figure who campaigned for women to be allowed to preach and to be ordained to the priesthood within the Church of England. Like More, her vision for herself and for the world evinces a thoroughly rational view of human society, but it is combined with a far more liberal theology and social politics than More's.

The fourth woman, Michèle Roberts, is still very much alive at the time of this writing. Born in 1949 and growing up in London, Roberts separated herself in large part from the Roman Catholic Church in which she was brought up in the wake of the so-called sexual revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, her journey as writer and female genius takes the shape of a critical but still passionate engagement—as a novelist and poet—with the traditions and sensibilities of her background, including the power and influence of a patriarchal Christian church.

[3] See Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Miriam Brody (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1992).

[4] See Jenny Daggers, *The British Christian Women's Movement: A Rehabilitation of Eve* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002).

These four women, then, have all been formed in some way by Christianity, its praxis, its beliefs, or its ethical and aesthetic sensibilities. The significant question, of course, is how—or whether—they have achieved female genius in the sense defined so far. Drawing on Beauvoir's understanding of subjectivity, female genius here describes the struggle to avoid being objectified within male-normative contexts while seeking to engage genuinely with "the other," including men. Bringing this together with insights from Kristeva, it is also a struggle toward the achievement of a kind of subjectivity that resists bracketing off singular aspects of a woman's life, such as, of course, her role as a woman in any particular context, or, in the context of this study, her involvement with Christianity. In other words, this notion of female genius tries to do justice to the full complexity of the lives of women who struggle against the consequences of male-normative frameworks of value while also managing to create new relationships and think in new ways that keep the temptations and perilous dangers of that framework itself clearly in focus. They are, for example, entering into dialogue with Christian Scripture rather than either reading "as instructed" or refusing to read at all. While this could be seen as merely a response to coercion, it is arguable that women did, and sometimes still do, work through dialogue with the problematic male-normative structures they encounter in order to achieve both subjectivity and their own warrant for faith.

These specific women were chosen, first of all, because of their published or circulated writing. This is not to suggest that it is only writers who can be female geniuses, although for Kristeva writing is one of the key ways in which we can achieve and maintain the kind of subjective mobility against the background of life's vicissitudes that lies at the heart of her theory of female genius. More pragmatically, it is also easier to work with publicly available texts. Of course, this focus on women's writing also indicates that all my subjects come from relatively privileged social backgrounds, and this means then that we are skirting other significant questions that concern how gender is constructed in accordance with distinctions of race, wealth, and social class. However, my hope is to outline a way of thinking about women as singular individuals whose capacity to flourish, while always framed within restrictive structures, cannot be reduced to a simple product of those structures.

The deliberate and conscious commitment of these four women to Christianity was naturally an important factor affecting their selection, although, as their lives and work indicate, this commitment is not necessarily an absolutely fixed or settled disposition. In fact, in all cases, a strictly Christian

focus in their lives is more prominent at some times than at others. They all begin with at least nominally Christian backgrounds, but the intensity and significance of that Christian formation varies.

They have also been chosen to represent different historical locations within the period of modernity defined as the era, in a European context, that begins with Christian dissent and reformation, as well as developments in scientific method and global exploration and expansion.[5]

Focusing on a range of historical contexts also makes it easier, perhaps, to claim that the development of female genius does not depend entirely on the conditions prevailing at any specific period—whether, for example, it is pre- or post-1949 and thus either influenced or not influenced by the developments of second-wave feminism. And this is important for the overall argument of the book, of course, insofar as it targets simplistic and smoothed-over models of women's progress.

However, these women all have a connection with one particular national church—the Church of England. This represents a form of continuity so that we know the kind of Christianity to which we are making reference. However, at the same time, it has to be said that the influences at play on these English Christian women are hugely variable, encompassing the German-influenced mysticism of the Philadelphians, the Calvinist and Arminian roots of Anglican evangelicalism, the Catholic idealism of the Oxford Movement, and pre–Vatican II Roman Catholicism.

These four candidates for the title of female genius all write about differing visions of God or God-filled worlds. By exploring their writing and their stories, I also want to contest oversimplified images of female oppression outside the normative and so-called secular liberalism of the modern Western world. This is not because I have any interest in reasserting the normativity of traditional forms of Christian patriarchal theology or ecclesial governance. However, I would suggest that women have been concerned with God, truth, and meaning over the centuries, and that they continue to be so. If we allow the possibility that these women are not only authors whose creativity has been ignored, misheard, or misread but sometimes creative authors who actually bring about transformation and change, we can also begin to allow for their role in bringing us to where we are today—particularly if we are

[5] These circumstances have been explored in an illuminating way, e.g., in Ivan Strenski's *Thinking about Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006).

prepared to accept that transformation and change do not simply have to be understood in the heroic sense associated with the Romantic genius as described by Kristeva and Battersby. Seeing these women in our past in the West as creative writers whose work or thoughts have been read and appreciated, we can begin to entertain the idea that our history has not simply been conditioned by a set of suffocating heteropatriarchal norms but also by something altogether more resilient—something that might yet be strong enough to support even a much more difficult discussion about the nature or extent of women's collusion with patriarchal oppression. If Beauvoir, Daly, and others of the second and third wave have taught us anything, it is surely the potentially revolutionary idea that we should attend to the work of women wherever and whenever we find it as a potential contribution to the world of serious ideas and innovative possibilities.

These following four studies draw on existing feminist analysis. What is different is the emphasis I want to place on the wider capacity for female genius within what has been portrayed as an unpromising context for establishing the subjectivity of women: Christianity and the Christian churches. Studies of women like these—undertaken in ever-increasing numbers by contemporary scholars—taken together, challenge us to acknowledge a tradition of women and the feminine, women who understood and may have resented the limitations they experienced but who have clearly not been silenced. Of course in some ways, inevitably, they will have conformed, internalizing and passing on sexism and misogyny. But, for all that, they may also have passed on an idea of female strength and creativity and maybe also some fragments of their female genius to inspire or challenge their readers. The intellectual brilliance and coherence of Beauvoir's analysis, for example, was a work of female genius that gave women a focus on their situation perhaps never achieved before, but it did not come out of nowhere.

Finally, it should be said to those readers who will perhaps object that I have ignored a host of far more brilliant women that this is in some ways beside the point. Whether these four women are extraordinary touches on our understanding of what counts as genius, of course. We have already discussed at length that it remains difficult for us to avoid importing into this term a set of assumptions (including "brilliance" or the "extraordinary," for example) that are strongly inflected with the exclusive terms of male genius. I would not want to deny that women can be outstanding, and I would regard the fact that we hear less of brilliant women than of men as a clear indication of resistant sexism within our academic institutions and public life. However,

the discussion of female genius in this book aims to take the reader into slightly more challenging territory than this and puts in question the conditions within which we are able to register a significant innovation or a transforming change of relationships. It explores the suggestion that we should, in theory, be aiming to identify the significance of female genius in intersubjective contexts or teamwork, for example, as well as in more conventional and individual achievements such as are presently identified and rewarded by, for example, peer review, government agencies, or charitable trusts. Female genius celebrates the process of achieving female subjectivity and denies that this is in any sense or context a merely "ordinary" accomplishment.

Jane Leade

Conventional wisdom might say that Leade—presented here as a gifted writer marked by genius and a significant contributor to the canon of serious literature about sacred things— has been ignored because she was a woman in the seventeenth century. If we accept the smoothed-over view of women's progress to which this conventional wisdom conforms, it seems self-evident that, when Leade was alive, times were unpromising and women could not flourish. However, Johanna Harris and Elizabeth Scott-Baumann, for example, contest this assumption in the introduction to their edited volume about thirteen Puritan women, drawing attention to precisely the kind of prejudice within seventeenth-century scholarship that says early modern women were excluded from the public sphere of intellectual thought and culture.[6] Of course, this broad view of women's progress is not simply wrong; it is possible to point to evidence that women have far greater freedom today in many ways than they did in the seventeenth century. But it is nonetheless a misleading perception when it makes us discount the details of historical—in this case, seventeenth-century—female lives.

So, putting this broad homogenizing narrative aside, it is important to recognize that there is also good evidence to suggest that women in the past were well aware that the authority of men was sometimes more illusory than real and that there might be other ways of making sense of the social order—perhaps in relation to a different order authorized under God. No doubt women and girls often felt afraid, lacking in confidence, or depleted

[6] See introductory remarks to Harris and Scott-Baumann, *The Intellectual Culture of Puritan Women, 1558–1680*, 2.

in energy and ambition as a direct result of the misogyny and heterosexism of the age, yet it is not thereby clear that they were never able to see past normative masculine values or were incapable of forming goals that minimized or even evaded these obstacles. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century women Kristeva describes in terms of female genius are not so much preoccupied with the significant circumstances of their gender as with rethinking, political, psychoanalytical, and literary forms, inventing new ways to look at political relationships subjective journeys or new kinds of female pleasures[7] within the singularity of their own contexts.

It makes sense, then, to imagine that Leade was engaged in similar kinds of innovative thinking and invention, responding, even consciously and creatively, to the culturally determined framework that normalized the dependence of women on the leadership of men in matters of theology and church order. In 1705, for example, Leade's close contemporary, Mary Astell (1666–1731), counseled women as a group against too much "deference to other people's judgements" in relation to their profession as Christians: "most of, if not all, the follies and vices that women are subject to, (for I meddle not with the men) are owing to our paying too great a deference to other people's judgments, and too little to our own, in suffering others to judge for us, when God has not only allowed, but required us to judge for ourselves."[8] Astell is, of course, like Leade, a child of her own time and patriarchal context, and it would be wrong to suggest that she was never constrained within it. These quoted words certainly imply that she was—sometimes. Yet the significance of seeing herself as a woman with God-given reason to use herself, rather than merely to conform to another's, speaks strongly to the kind of subjectivity and female genius developed here:

> A Christian woman therefore must not be a child in understanding. . . . I am a Christian then, and a member of the Church of England, not because I was born in England, and educated by conforming parents, but because I have, according to the best of my understanding, and with some application and industry, examined the doctrine and precepts of Christianity, the reasons and authority on which it is built."[9]

[7] Julia Kristeva, *Colette*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 419–27.

[8] Extract from Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England* (London, 1705), in *Women in English Religion, 1700–1925*, ed. Dale A. Johnson (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), 15–16.

[9] Astell, *Christian Religion*, 15.

It has to be said that Leade herself had considerably less confidence than Astell in the power of human reason to address her deepest needs or to aid her in her Christian calling. In fact, it is fair to say that she "saw her work as an onslaught on 'reason.'"[10] However, she had no less confidence than Astell in her ability to carry out innovative work and writing in describing a newly conceived mystical theology that she saw as her Christian vocation. For the period of her married life, so far as it is possible to judge,[11] Jane Leade appears to have followed an outwardly conventional pattern for an English woman of the seventeenth century. And it would be easy enough to attribute this long middle period of her life to a kind of "deference to other people's judgments." Nevertheless, although Leade's life was undoubtedly limited by patriarchal structures and values, it is clear that this is not the whole story.

She was born Jane Ward and baptized in the Church of England in Norfolk in 1624, at a time when it has been argued that many and perhaps most within that church saw themselves as "part of the larger Reformed family."[12] Nevertheless, Norfolk was a place of particularly Puritan sympathies, and, in an account of her life written much later in the century, Leade records how she had a sudden and dramatic conviction of faith[13] at the age of sixteen. She presents herself as one who, even at an early age, was set apart from the conventional pattern of home and parish life associated with a prosperous merchant family from East Anglia.[14] She frames herself as the Puritan woman for whom a striking conversion narrative gave proper authority to her religious status and credentials:[15] celebrating Christmas at home with music and dancing, Leade says that she heard a voice telling her to "CEASE FROM THIS, I HAVE ANOTHER DANCE TO LEAD THEE IN; FOR THIS IS VANITY."[16]

[10] Nigel Smith, "Pregnant Dreams in Early Modern Europe," 194.

[11] Nigel Smith makes the intriguing suggestion that Leade might have taken more than an academic interest in the antinomian debates of the 1640s and 1650s. However, he acknowledges that this is largely speculative. "Pregnant Dreams in Early Modern Europe," 196.

[12] Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches Purely Reformed: A Social History of Calvinism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002), xxiv.

[13] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 16–17.

[14] Smith, "Pregnant Dreams in Early Modern Europe," 191.

[15] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 17–18. See also on this, Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[16] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 17.

At the age of eighteen, Leade got her married brother to persuade their father to allow her a six-month stay with him in London—itself a perhaps surprising concession to a woman's freedom for some later readers—where, apart from looking for a suitable marriage partner for herself, she seems to have devoted her time and energies very much in the Puritan mode, reflecting on personal salvation and the inner spiritual state. By this time, dissent and revolution had fomented civil war in the country at large. In London in 1642, however, Christian preachers and lecturers of all Puritan persuasions were still holding many public and private meetings that a determined visitor like Leade could attend.

One of the clergymen she consulted was Tobias Crisp. Crisp was well known in London Puritan circles at the time for his antinomianism and for sermons that addressed the Puritan *ordo salutis*, that is, the description of who could be saved and how, that was thought by some like Crisp to be overly rigid. Leade found comfort in Crisp's much more radical approach that, questioning aspects of a typically Puritan understanding of predestination,[17] laid a foundation for the unique and ultimately Universalist ideas Leade would adopt as a mature writer.[18]

Of course, Leade's ability to frame her life to suit her own needs and desires as a Christian woman at this relatively early age cannot be overplayed. Within two years, she had given up the man she had found for herself in London as a suitable partner,[19] conformed to her parents' choice of a husband—a cousin—and moved to London with him. Not that this necessarily indicates that she was, in the existentialist sense, merely afraid to pay the price of freedom, though it does show that she was required to conform and that she did so.[20] However, it is possible, for example, that she had begun to grasp what might be involved in the achievement of subjectivity or female genius for herself as a Christian woman and to recognize that it would take time. It is possible that she had begun even at this point to do the work of thinking about

[17] David Parnham, "The Humbling of 'High Presumption': Tobias Crisp Dismantles the Puritan *Ordo Salutis*," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 56, no. 1 (2008): 51.

[18] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 17–21.

[19] See Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 21.

[20] It should be noted, of course, that across the whole period covered in this book, a choice of marriage partner for both men and women was not infrequently subject to parental choice or advice from the wider church community. See, e.g., Alan McFarlane's *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction, 1300–1840* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

the Christian theological and symbolic forms she had inherited in order to imagine new ways of conceiving them within her own contexts.[21]

In any event, her actions up to this point suggest she was a young woman of passion and conviction who took on and adapted a Puritan tradition of Christian conviction for herself with some independence of thought. Over the next twenty or so years of her marriage, she lived through an extremely dramatic period of English history. And it is perhaps partly for this reason that she knuckled down to housewifely duties, consigning her desires, questions, and spiritual explorations to the space these left her. In any event, little is known about her life during this period except that she remained in London with her husband and gave birth to their four daughters.[22]

Her marriage to William Leade does not appear to have been unhappy, though, like so many of their contemporaries, they suffered the loss of children as infants and only one of their children survived them both. Jane describes William Leade as an "excellent man,"[23] but the account of her life suggests that from the early 1660s onwards she felt increasingly constrained by her circumstances. It is an interesting question to ask what would have happened to her had the marriage continued for another twenty years or so.

With the restoration of Charles II as king in 1660, the Church of England set about re-establishing its privileged position over the assorted independent parties that had sprung up in the spaces created by the Commonwealth, the English Civil War, and their aftermath. It was clearly not what it had been before. It had lost a good deal of its actual power and moral authority, and Puritans or their heirs were clearly not going to be prevented from trying to work through some of the challenges they had posed to the social order. One such challenge, of course, related to a strictly gendered social hierarchy. Christian "sectaries," or groups of nonconforming Christians, continued to flourish, appealing to and drawing in women. Among these Christian radicals, some saw women as—at least in a spiritual sense—the equals of men and thus able to contribute fully to the work of prophesying, writing, and publishing and thus maintaining a flow of radical Christian literature.[24]

[21] Kristeva, *Colette*, 419–27.

[22] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 21. Hirst says that Leade's autobiographical "Lebenslauff der Autorin," in *Sechs Unschatzbare Mystiche Tractatlein* (Amsterdam, 1696) reveals very little about how she felt about the death of three daughters. However, it is perhaps significant that the loving Mother is a powerful element within her invocation of the divine Sophia.

[23] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 24.

[24] Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution 1603–1714* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson

It is not so surprising, then, that in this Restoration context Leade began to have what she understood as visionary experiences for which she was clearly anxious to find a context that went beyond the resources or opportunities her marriage and domestic life could provide. And then, in 1670, Leade suddenly found herself released from her marriage by her husband's unexpected death. She does not record exactly what she felt about this, but it is interesting to note how she uses the image of "the first husband" as a metaphor for the biblical law of the first covenant that, in the New Testament, is swept away by faith in the grace of divine salvation brought about through the death and resurrection of Christ. This is conceived by Leade as "the second marriage" to the Lamb; earlier she had described herself as "desponding ever to get rid of my First Husband."[25] This is not to suppose that she was directly disparaging her marriage or her husband's good qualities, but it may well reflect the sense in which she understood wifely obligations of the earthly kind to be analogous to the law of old covenant, something that in the light of the new covenant would be utterly swept away, leaving her clear to focus her attention on her mystical and theological imagination and on the vision of flourishing to which her experiences of divine Sophia bore witness.[26] Of course, it may also indicate that, just as "the old law" represents a temptation to sin, she genuinely mourned his death and the security he had provided for her, in spite of the freedom his death afforded her.

In any event, when her husband died intestate, leaving her to support herself and a dependent child, Leade seems to have resisted every kindly or well-meaning offer to secure her material comfort at the cost of drawing her back into the domestic context of family.[27] This time, it seems, she puts her desire for the space to develop her own singular response to her spiritual calling above everything else. Whatever the material benefits of remaining constrained by gender conventions identified so critically by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, it appears that Leade was fully prepared, at this stage, to set these benefits aside in favor of her own subjective need to respond to her visionary experience.

& Sons, 1961), 167; and Nigel Smith, *Perfection Proclaimed: Language and Literature in English Radical Religion, 1640–1660* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), 12–13.

[25] Jane Leade, *A Garden of Fountains, Etc. Or Divine Openings and Revelations since the Year MDCLXX* (London: printed and sold by J. Bradford, near Crowder's-Well, 1696), 69.

[26] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 26. Hirst draws here on other material to suggest that Leade deliberately compares William Leade with the first husband and the Lamb with the second, "unchangeable Mate."

[27] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 28.

In London she eventually found a home in the household of Dr. John Pordage. Pordage, as Rector of Bradfield in Berkshire, had been influenced by the Ranters and the Diggers, radical Puritan groups, and had established his own kind of radical Puritan community—mystics and prophets—in Bradfield. His practices had come under suspicion, and he had been ejected from his job as the parson of Bradfield in 1655 and then forced out of a clerical role entirely at the Restoration in 1662 under the Act of Uniformity that required all ministers to assent publicly to the Book of Common Prayer and obtain a license to preach from their diocesan bishop on pain of imprisonment. However, because of his personal wealth, he had been able to move to London and set up a similar community.[28]

By the time Leade's husband died, she had been connected with Pordage's household mysticism for several years. Whatever other people thought of her choices—her married daughter, for one, thought her improvident[29]—she was adamant in pursuing what she desired and felt called to do rather than what was conventional or convenient for others. By the time her spiritual diary *A Garden of Fountains* was published (1696–1701), and as a woman with prolific publications and connections across continental Europe, Leade was acclaimed as John Pordage's spiritual heir and the visionary leader of the Philadelphian Society. Against the backdrop of what an oversimplified narrative of women's progress might describe as the conventional limitations of women's lives at the time, she took upon herself the role of mystical theologian and prophet, reconnecting with the motivations of her teenage years and creating a theological vision of universal redemption, mediated to her in the form of the divine, sometimes voluptuously feminine, and maternal Wisdom/Sophia.[30]

After her husband's death and the move into John Pordage's household in 1674, Leade's life seems to have been focused on spiritual reflection, reading, and writing, initially for Pordage but increasingly for herself and in response to her visionary experiences. She also helped organize the regular meetings held within Pordage's circle. After his death this became Leade's circle and, ultimately, the Philadelphian Society—a millenarian "Religious Society for the Reformation of Manners, for the advancement of an Heroical Christian

[28] See Smith, "Pregnant Dreams in Early Modern Europe," 191; Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 91–92; 125; Philip Benedict, *Christ's Churches*, xxiv.

[29] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 28.

[30] Smith, "Pregnant Dreams in Early Modern Europe," 190–92.

Piety, and Universal Love towards All."[31] Relatively little is known about the group, but from the records kept after 1697 by one of its members—Richard Roach, the rector of St. Augustine's, Hackney—it seems that the group had a well-established tradition of meeting together "after the Primitive way of Attendance or waiting for the Holy Spirit."[32] Roach, who was required by the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Thomas Tenison to defend himself to against accusations of "religious enthusiasm,"[33] was a keen supporter of women prophesying, and it appears that the circle contained so many women "prominent both as believers and as prophets" that "it was thence call'd the Taffeta Meetings."[34] Given the nature of Leade's mystical reflections, particularly on the figure of Sophia, it seems likely that women felt particularly able and welcome to express themselves in this context.

Putting aside the kind of exaggeration that denies the achievements of any historical women—a slightly more considered opinion might be that Leade was an extraordinary woman alive at a time of widespread restrictions on women; in other words, that she was the exception that proved the rule. However, looking at the specificities of women's lives and cultural production in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, we are now becoming aware of the details of many more women's lives than was apparent, for example, to Beauvoir. Of course, although the Philadelphians and one or two other groups such as the Society of Friends proposed forms of gender equality and encouraged women to preach, it seems true that women were not taking on in huge numbers the kinds of roles and actions viewed as markers of Christian leadership or in the national Church of England. Explicit Pauline reservations about women exercising authority over men[35] were not easily or publicly ignored[36] when they had been relied upon for so long. But it is misleading to present women as therefore merely silent or acquiescent

[31] Francis Lee, *State of the Philadelphian Society* (London, 1697), 7.

[32] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 92.

[33] Nils Thune, *The Behmenists and the Philadelphians: A Contribution to the Study of English Mysticism in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Uppsala: Almquist & Wiksells, 1948), 96.

[34] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 93.

[35] Traditionalists have typically referred—in relation to the proper submission of women and the inappropriateness of their either speaking in Church or taking on a position of authority over men—to the Pauline or pseudo-Pauline books of the New Testament, e.g., 1 Tim 2:11-15; 1 Cor 14:33-36; Eph 5:22-24; Col 3:18; 1 Cor 11:3-16.

[36] Anne Laurence, "A Priesthood of She-Believers: Women and Congregations in Mid-Seventeenth-Century England," in *Women in the Church*, ed. W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 361–62.

Christians. Discussing women who participated in the different congregations during the 1640s and 1650s in England, Anne Laurence, for example, shows that many women were writing and publishing books on spiritual counsel and prayer or saw themselves as prophets and visionaries and that this was largely regarded as "uncontroversial."[37]

What is also interesting about Laurence's analysis of the situation—and this is corroborated by what Jacqueline Eales says about women at roughly the same period[38]—are the hints and suggestions that women routinely adopted strategies to circumvent or counteract the consequences of the Pauline injunctions writ large. Laurence, for example, describes evidence of a "counter-culture of women" that, to be sure, falls short of any direct challenge to male ecclesial power but involved women's meetings and occasional public protest and display, most of which received rather bad press, but all of which indicate that women had not lost the capacity to think or speak in new ways for themselves.[39]

Perhaps even more significantly, Laurence draws attention to the highly indicative confusion surrounding discussions precisely about the issue of women preachers at this period. Against a background in which some Independents—nonconformist Christians who saw themselves as independent of the national Church of England and of the forms of government it sponsored—began to suggest that a person with ministerial gifts could preach the Word of God as well as any Oxbridge graduate who had been ordained within the Church of England, the question of whether this applied equally to women as to less educated men was clearly being asked. Since there is very little evidence—according to either Laurence or Eales, for example—of any enthusiasm among men for including women in these roles,[40] the fact that the issue was debated at all suggests that women themselves were formulating the question of their fitness to preach, perhaps on a fairly regular basis.[41]

[37] Laurence, "A Priesthood of She-Believers," 348–49.

[38] See Jacqueline Eales, "Samuel Clarke and the 'Lives' of Godly Women in Seventeenth-Century England," in *Women in the Church*, ed. Sheils and Wood, 365–76.

[39] Laurence, "A Priesthood of She-Believers," 346–47.

[40] Laurence suggests that "there is even some debate as to whether the Quakers, generally regarded as extraordinarily open to the ministry of women, were pro-active in this sense." "A Priesthood of She-Believers," 359.

[41] Laurence, "A Priesthood of She-Believers," 352.

Eales adds to this picture of strategic circumvention in relation to women's roles within Christianity at the time through her close reading of Samuel Clarke's *The Lives of Sundry Eminent Persons in this Later Age* (1683), a popular collection of spiritual biographies largely culled from funeral sermons or published obituaries conforming to a common genre in Puritan literature in the seventeenth century.[42] One of Clarke's sources, for example, was an account written by the Puritan Richard Baxter, one of the leading divines of his age, about his wife Margaret. Richard Baxter's sometimes critical account nonetheless pays tribute to Margaret's abilities and reveals the extent to which he was aware of her active, intelligent cooperation.[43]

> [She] was better at resolving a case of conscience than most divines that ever I knew in all my life . . . abundance of difficulties were brought me, some about restitution, some about injuries, some about references, some about vows, some about marriage promises and many such like; and she would lay all the circumstances presently together, compare them, and give me a more exact resolution than I could do.[44]

Margaret Baxter was not going to be given her own cure of souls or be paid for her skill at adjudication. However, the fact that Baxter wrote in these terms suggests at the least that he knew forms of male privilege and authority could not be based on the idea of women's absolute inferiority. And it is at least possible that, rather than simply passing on the convention of submitting to the judgements of men, Margaret Baxter also passed on a capacity to challenge such conventional limitations in certain contexts.

At the outset of our brief excursion into the work of Jane Leade, we know that she was not the only woman seeing visions and dreaming dreams and publishing works of reflection on Christian theology, teaching, and experience at the time. More than this, we know that, although her work was not recommended reading for Church of England ordinands at Oxford and Cambridge Universities, some publishers thought it worth their while to print copies of her works, which were also translated into German and circulated on the continent.

Harris and Scott-Baumann also point out that more recent scholarship on early modern women itself challenges stereotypical demarcations of

[42] Eales, "Samuel Clarke and the 'Lives' of Godly Women," 365.

[43] Eales, "Samuel Clarke and the 'Lives' of Godly Women," 375.

[44] Richard Baxter quoted in Eales, "Samuel Clarke and the 'Lives' of Godly Women," 375.

women's "private" sphere by providing evidence to show that "probably the largest proportion of early modern women participated in literary endeavor through manuscript circulation and in context of collaborative exchange." This means that even though work may have stayed in manuscript form, through networks of correspondence, patronage, and translation, it might still be widely disseminated.[45] Moreover, just because women of this period did not protest their limitations explicitly—as feminist theologians of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have done—it does not necessarily mean that they were unaware of what it meant to be a woman or what it meant to achieve subjectivity or female genius in circumstances limited by the power and privilege of men.

It remains the case, however, that, although Leade's publications are widely available today in unregulated forms online and also accessible to the academic community through *Early English Books Online*, there have been, to date, no critical editions of her collected works. Christopher Hill's classic 1972 work on radical ideas in the seventeenth century, *The World Turned Upside Down*, is completely silent about Leade, although he makes a number of references to John Pordage and his "family communion"[46] and to the Philadelphian Society that came into existence at Leade's instigation in the years after Pordage's death in 1681. In other words, Leade's writings have still not achieved a certain kind of English literary, historical, or theological canonicity. Moreover, returning to her writing will certainly not provide the reader with references to "women" as a class in a developed Marxist sense or with calls for women to take up roles of leadership in Christian congregations, though, ironically, it appears that this was exactly what Leade herself was doing in relation to the Philadelphian Society from 1694.[47] This world was still publicly framed by a normative masculinity.

What, then, marks Leade's work out as the work of a female genius, and how does this support the idea that Beauvoir's analysis of the condition or situation of women does not tell us the whole story? There is a great deal that could be said about Leade. Phyllis Mack describes her as "the most eminent female visionary of the 1690s,"[48] and Julie Hirst accounts her "probably the

[45] See Harris and Scott-Baumann, *The Intellectual Culture of Puritan Women*, 8.

[46] See Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1991), 225, 284.

[47] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 91.

[48] Phyllis Mack, *Visionary Women: Ecstatic Prophecy in Seventeenth-Century England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 409.

most important female religious leader and prolific woman author in late seventeenth century England."[49] However, today it is primarily in her own writing that her legacy and her claim to female genius are to be found, and I want to set out, very briefly, four themes within Leade's work that seem to me to reflect her creative response to the limitations of her context and to exemplify her distinctive creative refiguring of a relationship with a God who bears the marks of Leade's gender.[50] Leade's gendered reading of biblical themes and her dazzling and in many ways daring configurations of the divine as feminine make her work unusual and interesting. What is just as important in terms of understanding her as a female genius, however, is her capacity to do these things in a male-normative context that had a tendency to regard women as lacking proper perspective or either the rational or moral ability to judge between competing ideas and concerns.

Sophia

Leade's treatment of Sophia as a theological trope in *A Garden of Fountains* is illustrated through many different configurations, images, and metaphors wound together in long sentences, sometimes revealing what must be a deliberately poetic half-rhyme and rhythm within the text.[51] In the opening paragraph, Leade refers to her first vision of Wisdom:

> At which sight I was somewhat amazed, but immediately this Voice came, saying, Behold I am God's Eternal Virgin-Wisdom, whom thou has been enquiring after; I am to unseal the Treasures of God's deep Wisdom unto thee, and will be as Rebecca was unto Jacob, a true Natural Mother; for out of my Womb thou shalt be brought forth after the manner of a Spirit, Conceived and Born again: this thou shalt know by a New Motion of Life, stirring and giving a restlessness, till Wisdom be born within the inward part of thy Soul. Now consider of my Saying till I return to thee again.[52]

[49] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 1.

[50] Most references will be to *A Garden of Fountains*, which was published in 1696–1701 in three volumes and which contains a series of actual and spiritual visions she had experienced and recorded twenty years previously. In this text, she describes the journey of her soul and the processes of its illumination and purification. See on this, Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 41.

[51] Catherine F. Smith, "Jane Lead: Mysticism and the Woman Cloathed with the Sun," in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 3–18.

[52] Leade, *Garden of Fountains,* 17.

Biblical images and metaphors predominate, but there are also descriptions of gardens and coastlines, rivers, caves, pirates, even a fighting ship or "man of war."[53] The full title of the work gives a flavor of the extraordinarily sensual imagery that characterizes the book: *A Garden of Fountains, Watered by the Rivers of Divine Pleasure and Springing up in all the Variety of Spiritual Plants; Blown up by the Pure breath into A Paradise, Sending forth their Sweet Savours, and Stong Odours, for Soul Refreshing*.[54]

In the visionary accounts that form the substance of *A Garden of Fountains*, Leade refers to Wisdom and to her own relationship with her in terms of many richly resonant symbols. Most commonly she is Mother but also crowned Queen, God's Eternal Virgin-Wisdom, Princess, and the "Figure of a Woman, most richly adorned with transparent Gold, her hair hanging down and her Face as the terrible Crystal for brightness."[55] Wisdom's words are oil from a vessel and milk from her breast. She is a flaming heart out of which sprouts a tree on whose root "God" is engraved, which puts forth twelve branches, each bearing "a different and peculiar fruit."[56]

To represent Wisdom in "Joint-Union"[57] with Christ, she also refers to two biblical couples: first, Wisdom is the true Delilah of the true Samson (Judges 13–16), the dedicated Nazirite who is Christ or God. Given the tendency of biblical readers to see Delilah as a figure of sexualized treachery,[58] this seems a strange image to choose. And yet this biblical encounter packs an erotic punch far greater than the interaction between more exemplary biblical couples like Elkanah and Hannah or Abraham and Sarah, for example, or even Adam and Eve. And it is surely this that Leade wants, in order to infuse the visionary Wisdom and her closeness to God with the most powerful intensity as she urges her neophyte—Leade herself—similarly to enter into relationship with the divine Lover:

> Therefore if thou wouldst his Delilah be, of perfect Beauty with spotless Chastity, which will well please this mighty Prince of Peace, who will not thence refuse thee, when well assured that thou has declined and forsaken thy Father's House and Kindred, never to turn back to them more, but

[53] Leade, *Garden of Fountains,* 75.
[54] Leade, *Garden of Fountains,* title page.
[55] Leade, *Garden of Fountains,* 17.
[56] Leade, *Garden of Fountains*, 35.
[57] Leade, *Garden of Fountains*, 43.
[58] See Mieke Bal, *Death and Dissymmetry: The Politics of Coherence in the Book of Judges* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

> constantly to him cleave; then his Head on thy Lap he will repose, and his hidden Strength to thee reveal, and nothing from thee conceal, being in Joint-Union, no more twain, but one Spirit: The Seven Locks of his Power he will suffer thee to unloose, and draw out therefrom such Might as may slay and overcome the Philistine's Host.[59]

The second biblical couple—the Shulamite woman and her lover from the Song of Solomon—are characterized by a similar erotic intensity woven together with another metaphor for Wisdom; the metaphor of the key to knowledge of God: "This is Wisdom's Key, which will make our Hands drop with sweet smelling Myrrh upon the handle of her Lock. Which while I was opening her Privy-Door, with this Key, my Soul failed within me and I retained no strength."[60] Of course, Leade's thinking belongs within an identifiable biblical and theological tradition that particularly reflects the influence of the theosophist Jacob Boehme to whose work she was introduced by John Pordage and from whom she may, in the first place, have derived her focus on Sophia from more general Behemenist claims that the Godhead embodied the feminine as well as the masculine.[61] Nevertheless, Leade leans increasingly toward a universalism that conflicts with Boehme's views on predestination, adopting, from the mid-1680s, a concept of universal salvation. She claimed authority for this "as a prophetess revealing God's will,"[62] relying, in other words, on her own visions of the figure of Sophia that she believed were sent from God.[63] Leade's son-in-law Francis Lee, who was active in assisting her in collecting and publishing her work, denied any suggestion that Leade saw Sophia as a goddess[64]—itself an interesting disclaimer—but it does appear from her writing that Leade's was a particularly intense and personal vision of Sophia—"experiential and not systematic"[65]—who spoke directly to her and viewed Leade as her interpreter, rather than occupying the position of simply an important theological symbol.

[59] Leade, *Garden of Fountains,* 43. See Judg 16:18-19.
[60] Leade, *Garden of Fountains,* 24. See Song of Solomon 5:4-6.
[61] Smith, "Pregnant Dreams in Early Modern Europe," 190.
[62] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 116.
[63] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 7.
[64] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 67.
[65] Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 67.

Biblical Confidence

Another biblical image that plays a significant role within *A Garden of Fountains* is the biblical narrative of Rebecca and Jacob (Gen 27). Leade sees herself in the role of Rebecca, who helps her favorite son gain an advantage over his brother by counseling Jacob and then preparing the savory stew for her husband, the patriarch Isaac—who also stands for God—by means of which this advantage is to be achieved. But she also sees herself as Jacob the favorite/favored son, who steals the birthright from his twin brother Esau, and as the kid killed for the stew in obedience to Rebecca's instructions. In Leade's mystical imagery, the folding in of metaphors continues in the parallels she also draws between herself; the slaughtered animal; Isaac, whose sacrifice God demands; and the Paschal Lamb, which is, of course, Jesus himself.

Leade clearly approached Scripture with a quite extraordinary confidence and in the construction of her elaborate metaphors shows herself able to imagine, to think, and to construct an image of divine activity that does not merely spring from conventional views of either women's proper role or capability. It is, for example, intriguing that she sees herself, like Jacob, as the chosen son who is in a sense not the legitimate heir but, with the connivance of Wisdom/Rebecca, takes his place. Though in her account she justifies Esau's demotion from legitimate heir on the grounds of an identification between him and the earthly life of the body, how appropriate nonetheless for a woman aiming to flourish in a world dominated in some obvious ways by men to take the divinely sponsored upstart Jacob and his scheming mother Rebecca as her biblical patrons! Arguably, her choice of this particular metaphor and the way in which she uses it indicates that she is conscious of conventional framings in terms of gender. However, she moves beyond these limitations to frame new kinds of representation in direct response to her desire to rethink the biblical images in her own terms as a female genius and in this way to engage in a pleasurable dialogue with the text rather than simply to repudiate or dismiss it.

Against All Reason

Leade's reliance on an internal, subjective certainty rather than on any rational criteria once again places her in the tradition of Luther's reformed Christianity and the German Lutheran Jacob Boehme's mystical theology, and it anticipates the antirationalist, antideist perspective of a Romantic visionary

writer like William Blake.[66] Leade is not afraid to be identified as a champion of faith and an opponent of rationality[67] in a way that the later feminist figure Mary Wollstonecraft and her heirs would have found counterproductive.[68] For Leade, reason is closely related to what she sees as the limitations of the body and this earthly life. For example, when Wisdom calls her to follow, she is surprised by a "potent Enemy": "that great Monarch Reason, to whose Scepter all must bow that live in the Sensitive Animal Life." She finds it impossible "to discharge [her] self from being a Subject to his Starry Kingdom": "as I stood in the Line of Nature, I was under the dominion of the Starry Region, in the strife of the four Elements, which brought in the Curse, where Care and Fear, and the toil and labour of the Body did consist."[69]

For Wollstonecraft, of course, the nonrational dimension of subjectivity had reverted to a type of contaminating madness or intellectual weakness that thinkers of her Enlightenment era associated with the dangers of superstition and with institutional Christianity. Leade, the mystic, in contrast, invests in the nonrationality of a powerful visionary faith and her own literary powers to express the ineffability of God's love for her and to signal a kind of knowledge that goes beyond the knowledge of the discursive intellect. This

[66] What Christopher Burdon writes about Blake seems eminently applicable to Leade: "Reason is not the supreme method of thought but an oppressive death-dealing denial of God. . . . Blake is insistent on his own vision, which is both personal and cosmic, which uses Christian Scripture as its fulcrum but radically rewrites that Scripture. . . . He is his own prophet, not the exegete of others' wisdom and he writes his own scripture." "William Blake," in *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, ed. Andrew Hass, Elisabeth Jay, and David Jasper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 450.

[67] In Leade, *Garden of Fountains*, "Reason" is more than once referred to as the enemy, whereas biblical references abound. This is against a background of seventeenth-century English culture in which "natural religion" was increasingly referred to by philosophers as "somehow ill at ease with scriptural revelation." Basil Willey, *The Seventeenth Century Background* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1934), 73. See also Ivan Strenski, *Thinking about Religion: An Historical Introduction to Theories of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 33–60.

In her "Introduction to the Spiritual Dying," Leade talks about rationality and a concern for heavenly things as in a pair of scales: "For if they cannot consist together, but the one must be laid down, the Wise rationality will soon shew himself that his Birth is but from the Astral Region; it is of no higher descent but from the Womb of fallen Time and therefore a Spirit not to be trusted." *The Heavenly Cloud Now Breaking: The Lord Christ's Ascension-Ladder Sent down To shew the way to reach the Ascension and Glorification through the Death and Resurrection* (London, 1681), 11.

[68] See Alison Jasper, "Body and Word," in *Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, ed. Hass et al., 782–85.

[69] Leade, *Garden of Fountains,* 37.

view of God is sponsored by a personification of the divine Wisdom in the feminine; a boldly appropriate move for a female visionary.

In literary and historical feminist scholarship, Leade's work has been acknowledged as part of a notable growth in women's writing generally in the seventeenth century, and, in its mystical interests, her work can be seen as a particular challenge to a privileged masculine epistemology based on reason[70] so characteristic of the Enlightenment modes of thinking that are beginning to take shape at this time. Once again, though it might not be easy for a modern feminist to identify with the terms in which Leade is writing, it is arguable at least that one reason why she makes common cause with this antirationalist view is that she is aware in some way of the sense in which irrationality is coded as feminine. Her ability to embrace this could then be seen as an awareness of her singular significance as a woman and an act of female genius. This is not something she makes explicit; however, it might well explain why Boehme's work—with its perhaps counterintuitive figuration of divine femininity—had such a powerful impact on her in the first place.

The Alchemist

One of the most prevalent images Leade employs for soul transformation is an extended alchemical metaphor by means of which she becomes the adept healer and magus. In the seventeenth century, alchemy was understood as the—largely fruitless—search for the means to turn base metals into silver and gold. It nevertheless continued to interest a number of learned and reputable scholars who, following in the footsteps of Roger Bacon in the thirteenth century, for example, had attempted to use various alchemical methods to achieve forms of "tangible knowledge"[71] in a prescientific age. In spite of its failure to produce the noble metals or—even more ambitiously—to reveal the secret of eternal life, it lent itself to interpretation in terms of moral or spiritual transformation, sometimes associated with forms of Christian salvation. Although alchemy fell increasingly out of serious interest throughout this period, it seems as if at least one member of the Royal Society, Robert Plot, was still knowledgeable about the subject in the later

[70] See Christina Berg and Philippa Berry, "Spiritual Whoredom: An Essay on Female Prophets in the Seventeenth Century," in *1642: Literature and Power in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Francis Barker et al. (Colchester: University of Essex, Department of Government, 1981).

[71] E. J. Holmyard, *Alchemy* (New York: Dover, 1990), 119.

seventeenth century.[72] The esoteric imagery meantime continues to be found in contemporary works of literature and poetry of the age, including the work of women.[73] Leade, then, is the qualified practitioner.

> For in this Place all that counted worthy shal be, to come in here with thee, must put on Transfiguration, and act in the Supercelestial Philosophy, as holy Magus's that skilful are to work in the Furnace, that maintained is from the One Burning Element; which giveth the High Superelementary Matter, the Composition whereof maketh up the Store of all Acting Wonders.[74]

This is the initiation into a place of education, where a spirit offers to instruct Leade as neophyte: "For he said he found there was that Signature in me, that would take Impression, from the Supercelestial Planets."[75] From here she is led into the company of the Apostle John, "the chief Magician,"[76] who makes the alchemical transmutation into gold by means of "Wisdom's White Tincturing Stone."[77]

The alchemist is typically male, of course, although Leade was not alone among women in using alchemical imagery.[78] Nonetheless, what the use of this imagery reveals is the clearest expression of Leade's adoption of the role of the male officiant and leader within the congregation. While not abandoning the role of visionary, which arguably always allows the individual concerned to cloak or veil his or her own agency and decision-making role, Leade places herself not as a mere channel for God or Sophia's message but as a student with a skill to learn and in which to become a proficient and, even more, dedicated priest within the Tabernacle built at Wisdom's behest: "After the finishing of the Tabernacle-work, an order from the Heavenly Court did come forth for a Convocation of a Seven Days separation to be held by us, who are called lawfully for to strive to be Masters of the Divine Art, according to Wisdom's high Philosophical Rules. . . . Draw near ye Holy and Separated Ones."[79]

72 Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 43.
73 Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 41.
74 Leade, *Garden of Fountains*, 35.
75 Leade, *Garden of Fountains*, 57.
76 Leade, *Garden of Fountains*, 62.
77 Leade, *Garden of Fountains*, 63.
78 Hirst, *Jane Leade*, 40. On alchemy, see Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, 287–305.
79 Leade, *Garden of Fountains*, 115–16.

Leade speaks out of profound Christian faith, but it would be hard to think of a greater contrast between the confidence with which she describes Sophia's bearing toward her as her child and prophet:

> Now as I was attending to obtain a fresh Visit, being entered into this first Mansion of her House, to hear and learn further, she said on this wise, That I was greatly beloved, and she would be my Mother and so should I own her and call her, who would now be to me as *Rebecca* was to *Jacob,* to contrive and put me in a way how I should obtain the Birth-right-Blessing.[80]

and her contemporary Milton's barbed lines in book IV of *Paradise Lost* (1667) that put Eve (and womankind) firmly in her place:

> For softness she and sweet attractive grace,
> He for God only, she for God in him. (lines 297–98)

In Conclusion

These—Leade's confident handling of the figure of Sophia, her choice of the biblical couple Rebecca and Jacob, her antirationalism, and her use of alchemical imagery—are four examples of what makes Leade's work distinctive and marks it out as the work of female genius, allowing for the possibility that her writing betokens a reflective and innovative response to the limitations and the possibilities of her singular situation in which experiences of exclusion from the privileged discourses of heteropatriarchal communities, theology, or Church leadership might, according to some ways of looking at her situation, have been expected simply to flatten her into conformity. In conclusion, then, Leade was a singular seventeenth-century woman whose literary output, along with much else written by women, would probably not have been regarded as worth reading by many, if not most, of those who in one sense framed what was acceptable as serious writing on sacred themes in that century. But while it is perfectly clear that limitations on the freedom and creativity leached out creative energy and diminished the lives of countless women and girls, what is just as interesting is the fact that women like Jane Leade existed and devoted themselves to writing, not simply mirroring the standards and expectations of men but clearly imagining new discursive spaces for themselves and a committed reading public. Leade brings new thoughts and relationships into being in her work, born out of her reading and visionary

[80] Leade, *Garden of Fountains*, 25. Emphasis in original.

experience as well as her conversations with like-minded people. In this way she fosters female genius and implicitly resists the idea that the subjectivity of women—their ability to ask and formulate new answers, for example, to the question of "What is a woman?"—could ever be completely swallowed up within normative masculinity. Used in this way, the concept of female genius helps us to account for Leade's creativity as her own and neither the result of masculine influences nor a monstrous anomaly—a masculine concept mismatched with a feminine body. The consequences of patriarchy cannot be forgotten, of course, but they likewise should not be allowed to obliterate the evidence of women's own proper creativity.

Leade's claim to creativity as Christian prophetess, visionary, and writer is foregrounded here as support for the proposition that women represent an enduring and creative presence within the Christian centuries that now needs to be taken seriously on its own terms. Leade's work should be viewed not simply as one of a small number of exceptions that prove the rule but perhaps as one of many elements within a tradition of women's writing that has a potential for influence, not excluding, perhaps, some role in the emergence of modern feminist theory and theology in the twentieth century.

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5

Hannah More

I did not feel I was a "born" writer. Yet at the age of fifteen when I wrote in a friend's album the plans and reference which were supposed to give a picture of my personality, I answered without hesitation the question "What do you want to do later in life?" with "To be a famous author."

—Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*

Setting the Scene

In 1705 Mary Astell's essay defended woman's reason and called for more and better education for women, taking the view that a woman's reason had been given her for a noble and important purpose she defines as "religion."[1] Although she does not explicitly take issue with the idea, there is a delicate hint of irony in her reference to the convention of separate spheres or exclusive roles for women and men. At the same time, she urges women in the strongest terms not to allow others to do their thinking for them simply because they are women: "it is allowed on all hands, that the men's business is without doors, and that theirs is an active life; women who ought to be retired, are for this reason designed by providence for speculation."[2] And by

[1] Mary Astell, *The Christian Religion, as Profess'd by a Daughter of the Church of England* (London, 1705). In *Women in English Religion, 1700–1925*, ed. Dale A. Johnson (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), 15.

[2] Astell, *Christian Religion*, 20.

"speculation" Astell clearly implies theological reflection, thus making what seems, from a later perspective, a bold proposal about the nature of woman's theological work.[3] Of course, by 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft had moved away decisively from this earlier view of men and women as essentially parts of a single, male, marital unit, deriving her view of what a woman should do and be from the equal rationality she possessed, not as a part of a man but alongside him. She proposed rational freedom as the proper condition for both sexes without feeling the necessity for further hierarchical distinctions or connections between men and women. Her sense of the equality properly existing between partners in marriage is quite different from Milton's picture of Edenic subordination,[4] and Wollstonecraft's treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), paves the way, in a theoretical sense, for further discussion in the nineteenth century of questions concerning woman's proper sphere and her political emancipation. It also differs from the sense in which Astell proposes that women should think for themselves. Ultimately, Astell argues that women needed to think for themselves in order more effectively to respond to a godly vocation. Wollstonecraft does not take issue directly with notions of women's godly vocation, but neither is this given a particular priority.

During the eighteenth century, then, there was a growth in the view—that would have been deeply distrusted by dissenting Christian Jane Leade, of course—that aesthetics, ethics, and knowledge of the world should be based on principles of human reason mediated increasingly by science and new industrialized technologies. Yet, in spite of this view, with its promise of enlightenment and delivery from the irrational forces of magic and superstition, some very fundamental—and not necessarily rational—forms of social organization retained a powerful influence over women's lives. The second half of the eighteenth century saw revolutionary changes in society, as widespread industrialization of the means of production took hold in England, but while men and women were increasingly forced from rural to urban communities in response, gendered hierarchies remained significant at all levels of society.

Yet, within this apparently still limited and limiting context for women, Hannah More (1745–1833), alongside a number of other contemporary

[3] Astell, *Christian Religion*, 14.

[4] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Miriam Brody (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1992), 88.

women, came to enjoy a public reputation on her own merits as a literary figure. As a woman, she still had to deal with the gendered differential. Ann Stott, More's most recent biographer, notes, for example, that although the painter Richard Samuel paid tribute to More and eight other prominent women in his engraving (and painting) of "The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain"—indicating her prestige among a group of women recognized for their talent and accomplishment as writers, historians, and critics—it was an undifferentiated group. It stood in marked opposition to "the rugged individuality of the portraits of Johnson, Burke and Goldsmith," suggesting how far the most gifted of women still had to go "to achieve equality of esteem."[5]

However, starting her public career as a poet and a playwright, More went on to become an influential commentator on issues of public morality: from the question of the slave trade to the nature of family life and Christian observance in Georgian England. She was also involved in setting up and managing a widespread network of Sunday schools in the Mendip area near Bristol; her purpose was to address what she saw as the poverty and godlessness of large parts of the rural population.[6] A single woman from a relatively humble background, More also earned enough during her writing career not only to support herself and her family but also to make generous donations to philanthropic causes of the day.[7]

Today, however, More is very much overshadowed by female contemporaries like Fanny Burney, Jane Austen, and Mary Wollstonecraft, and in comparison with recent feminist theory, she is certainly more conservative. She was, for example, quite dismissive of Mary Wollstonecraft—much celebrated as the foremother of modern Western liberal feminism—and no doubt, disapproved of the unhappy relationship with Gilbert Imlay that led to Wollstonecraft giving birth to an illegitimate child and making an unsuccessful attempt at suicide. Wollstonecraft, whose creative output was not, apparently, diminished by these traumatic personal circumstances,[8] is at first glance, more easily accommodated to the kind of authenticity of which Beauvoir and the existentialists spoke. She is clearly a female genius, contesting normative structures so as to rethink social and literary forms and invent

[5] Anne Stott, *Hannah More: The First Victorian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 51.

[6] Stott, *Hannah More*, 103–5.

[7] Karen Swallow Prior, *Hannah More's* Coelebs In Search of a Wife*: A Review of Criticism and a New Analysis* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 6.

[8] Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 15–18.

new ways of looking at them on her own terms. Yet More's life and work also indicate something more than mere survival or craven capitulation. It is important not to miss the complexity and creativity of her subjective strategies in the circumstances of life bounded by normative masculinity and patriarchal expectations.

Personal Successes and Failures

More was baptized in the Church of England and attended her parish church regularly with her parents.[9] She took these Christian framings seriously, and in this sense she was subject from birth to the obstacles raised to female autonomy and self-realization inherent in this Christian context. In the Church of England at the time, it would have been much harder to take on formal leadership roles than it had been, for example, for Jane Leade within the dissenting community of the Philadelphians at the end of the seventeenth century. Yet it is clear that whatever restrictions prevented women from getting involved in theology or church leadership in the Church of England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they were not sufficient to prevent a woman like More from contemplating theological ideas or from taking on roles of leadership whenever the opportunity presented itself. More had these interests and she found ways to pursue them.

Of course, the reader needs to view critically any claim that she achieved an equitable position within the Church or that she established herself as female genius simply as a result of this interested involvement with it. It cannot be assumed that More's work represents a creative response to her circumstances just because she was a woman with a respected public profile in a patriarchal context.

The answer to the question of whether and how she can be considered a genuine female genius will depend on whether it is possible to show that her life and work have fostered new relationships or made new connections that expanded her own sympathies and the life of the embodied mind, allowing her to express thoughts and ideas that were not cramped and contained within merely masculinist assumptions. As established already, this does not mean she has to be a feminist or to embrace some kind of recognizably feminist ideology. But it is important to see some indication of a life engaging both mind and body in work that makes it more rather than less appropriate,

[9] Stott, *Hannah More*, 79.

for example, to talk about the creation of new relationships or certain kinds of pleasures—including those that relate to God and the life of the Christian.

The alternative is that More was merely concerned with "getting out of it with a whole skin,"[10] as Beauvoir suggested that most women enslaved by their relationships to men are really limited to doing. Was all that More was doing a matter of bargaining for the comforts of social approval, material security, or a kind of slavish Christian conformity? Was she making do with lesser scope and fewer rewards than contemporary males, her ambition distorted by the dominant ideology of patriarchal society clothed in the language of transcendent, gendered hierarchies?

What, then, of More's life and work in more detail; how to build a case for female genius? By her late twenties, More had launched herself onto the London literary scene in a striking example of a kind of social mobility, capitalizing on her talents as a writer to escape from the mundane existence of a schoolteacher into London literary and social circles, as her sister Sally's recalls in a letter written in 1772 to her other sisters at home in Bristol, about Hannah's social success:

> We drank tea at Sir Joshua's with Dr Johnson. Hannah is certainly a great favourite. She was placed next him and they had the entire conversation to themselves. They were both in remarkably high spirits; it was certainly her lucky night! I never heard her say so many good things. The old genius was extremely jocular and the young one [Hannah] very pleasant. You would have imagined that we had been at some comedy had you heard our peals of laugher.[11]

However, there was a potentially disastrous hiatus in More's literary success when her patron, the actor/producer David Garrick, died in 1779, and a second play intended to consolidate her earlier success on the London stage in 1777–1778—her tragedy, *Percy*, performed at Covent Garden Theatre—received disappointing reviews. As a result of these setbacks, More was less in the public eye in the 1780s and from her midthirties onwards, and she transferred much of the focus of her life to a group of evangelical Christians. Initially this group, apart from herself, was composed of young men concerned with the abolitionist cause and the new radical "religion of the heart"

[10] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1972), 615.

[11] See the introduction to Hannah More, *Strictures on Female Education* (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1995), 3.

characteristic of the evangelical revival—who subsequently became known as the Clapham sect. Although as she got older More largely withdrew from London life, spending more time working with her sisters in the Bristol area, she continued to visit London from time to time and to use her literary talents in support of this group of influential Christians.

What evidence is there that More fits the pattern of female genius, especially once she begins to take Christian observance and "vital religion" more seriously? Can it be said that she does this in a way that marks her life, relationships, or creative output as innovative in any way?[12] The evidence of female genius, of course, does not have to be found in the public domain—published works or public exhibitions, even "performances" of the conversational kind her sister Sally described. The female genius is not necessarily a public figure. The term could define something more intimate or personal. As noted already, Julia Kristeva gives the example of the way an intellectual woman of the twenty-first century—it seems probable that she has herself or women like her in mind—handles strongly critical reactions of various kinds to the subjective choices she makes to be both a philosopher and a mother and draws those experiences together in her professional writing.[13] So in More's case we may be looking for evidence of similarly intimate subjective choices rather than, say, simply tracking the extent to which she is willing and able, publicly, to challenge church and theological structures in a way that conforms with more recent liberal feminist criticisms of them. In contrast, More's claim to female genius might be built, for example, on her efforts to forge a new kind of relationship with her own life and times through her increased involvement in a form of Christian piety that could mediate the pleasure she has both in writing and in intellectual effort and to compensate—if this can avoid the perils of drifting into collaboration or bad faith—in some way for the disappointments patriarchal society had meted out to her.

[12] More does not appear to have undergone any dramatic conversion experience, but see Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 59–64. Stott notes that in 1782 More "made her first literary attempt to reconcile the two halves of her life by publishing . . . *Sacred Dramas* and *Sensibility*: the one an attempt to make the Bible familiar to young readers, the other an advocacy of the religion of the heart." She also notes in relation to the "theatrical short comings" of the *Dramas* that she "agreed with her publisher, Cadell, that she was now 'too good a Christian for an author.'" Stott, *Hannah More*, 83.

[13] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), xv.

Stott draws our attention to some of these disappointments. She paints a picture of the young Hannah More as an attention seeker, characterized from an early age in terms of "strong emotions, unquenchable intellectual curiosity, a great desire to shine in company." She talks about More's flirtatiousness,[14] and she refers to her enormous need for friendship and affection.[15] This sketch of More's character echoes Toril Moi's descriptions of the young Beauvoir a century or so later as a very bright little girl. The young Beauvoir is convinced that she can gain and hold her father's sustaining love and admiration solely by being interesting and shining in the company of her parents' friends. By her teenage years, Beauvoir felt she had been supplanted in her father's affections by a younger sister—prettier but not as clever as she was. Moi suggests that when in her early twenties Beauvoir describes herself as less able and less the philosopher than her lover Jean-Paul Sartre, she had already learned that, under patriarchy, a woman's power to seduce could not rest on her ability to be interesting in herself. To seduce Sartre, competing with him on equal terms as a philosopher was not enough; it might even prevent her from getting the kind of love and admiration she craved.[16]

Returning to the youthful More, we note in a pastoral verse drama, *The Search after Happiness*, written when she was only eighteen, that More seems conflicted in a way that is very similar. She longs for the fame and applause she associates with the public world of men in terms of bursting "those female bonds, which held / My sex in awe," and yet she is already very well schooled by those bonds to a particular performance, again, echoing Beauvoir's claim that women learn at an early age about the need to offer men the myth of submission because in terms of normative masculinity, "nothing depend[ed] on her."[17] In *The Search After Happiness*, More addresses the female pupils she is teaching in her sisters' school with advice that shows how thoroughly she had absorbed the message that dissimulating and hiding her own intellectual strength is the way to get what she desires:

> By yielding she [woman] obtains the noblest sway,
> And reigns securely when she seems t'obey.[18]

[14] Stott, *Hannah More*, 12.

[15] Stott, *Hannah More*, 193.

[16] Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 44.

[17] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 381.

[18] Hannah More, *The Search After Happiness: A Pastoral Drama* (Bristol, 1762), quoted in Stott, *Hannah More*, 13.

From this it seems clear that by the age of eighteen Hannah had already asked and begun to answer Beauvoir's question, "What is a woman?"[19] The answer outlined in *The Search* must have come painfully to mind for a girl of such intelligence and sensitivity, not least when she reflected on her own random and inconsequential education in comparison with that available to an able boy at the time.[20]

Her father, an educated though not a wealthy man of Christian convictions,[21] earned his living first as an exciseman and later as a schoolmaster. It appears that he had initially taught Hannah mathematics and Latin but at some point had simply refused to pursue the subjects with her although More had proved herself more than capable.[22] These were not subjects on the curriculum More's older sisters drew up for their Bristol school, either. Instead, at this school—which More herself attended—girls learned arithmetic and modern languages: French, Italian, Spanish.[23] It seems more than possible that More's father had thought Latin and mathematics unsuitable for any young woman who had pretensions to feminine propriety. Ann Stott suggests that, although this early experience may have fueled More's subsequent desire to reform the education of girls,[24] it may also have initiated an anxiety that her passion for learning could be construed as "unfeminine" and thus come to represent an obstruction to other significant satisfactions. Once again, from *The Search After Happiness*:

> Science for female minds was never made;
> Taste, elegance, and talents may be ours,
> But learning suits not our less vigorous powers . . .
> For Woman shines but in her proper sphere.[25]

More would also have been reminded of her female dependence and vulnerability to the whims of patriarchal society by another painful incident. In her early twenties, she accepted an offer of marriage from William Turner, a wealthy older man who had seemed a perfect choice for a young woman of

[19] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 13.

[20] Stott, *Hannah More*, 6n22.

[21] Stott, *Hannah More*, 79.

[22] Stott, *Hannah More*, 6.

[23] Stott, *Hannah More*, 10.

[24] Stott detects in More's later attacks on the superficial nature of girls' education a clear indication that she felt she herself had been shortchanged. Stott, *Hannah More*, 6.

[25] More, *The Search After Happiness*, quoted in Stott, *Hannah More*, 13.

modest means. Yet Turner prevaricated endlessly, postponing their wedding three times over six years. Eventually, the small amount of capital she possessed spent and the butt of unkind gossip, she broke the relationship off.[26] Once again, satisfactions—this time linked to all the possibilities of marriage and motherhood—had eluded her, and it is tempting to speculate that More was once again made to feel her intellect and ambition had somehow, and in a way for which she was culpable, contributed to that frustration. In the end Turner offered—and More eventually accepted from him—an annuity of £200 per year that undoubtedly helped launch her literary career. Yet it is hardly surprising that at first she rejected his offer as an insult,[27] nor is it difficult to imagine the disappointment and humiliation of being somehow necessarily beholden to a man who had rejected her as his wife and as the mother of his children.

Of course, More went on to prove that she was more than capable of supporting herself, and yet the length of time she was prepared to wait for Turner to make up his mind was itself an indication of how far she must have felt that marriage with him represented the most appropriate move to provide for her own future happiness. But if she seemed to accept Turner's prevarications somewhat passively, we need to remember that at the time the view of a woman as fundamentally subsumed within her relationships to men was still a widely held assumption—for all that someone like Wollstonecraft rejected it. The most familiar representation of this relationship was marriage, of course. The marriage relationship, with all that it implied about eroticized male domination and possession as well as about complementarity and mutual support in godly living, was invoked in the New Testament as a sacred symbolic representation of the hierarchical relationship between God or Christ (Lord/husband) and the church or the community of men and women (virgin/wife).[28] The nuptial imagery in the words of the marriage service read at every wedding solemnized in the parish church was lodged within the common imaginary together with the implication it carried that man and woman complete each other by fulfilling their respective and hierarchically distinguished roles. The eighteenth-century jurist Sir William

[26] Stott, *Hannah More*, 17–20.

[27] Stott, *Hannah More*, 20.

[28] In Ephesians 5:22-24, marriage is described in terms of the relationship between Christ and the church: "Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be in everything, to their husbands" (NRSV).

Blackstone gives us a sense of how this imaginary is played out in English law: "the husband and wife are one, and the husband is that one." Here we see, of course, that for all the rhetorical flourish of the Miltonic formulation, in the middle of the eighteenth century, the legal status of English women who are wives is aligned with that which is governed, rather than framed in terms of an equal and independent partner in some endeavor or business. In a system regulated by precedent, husbands conventionally had responsibility for their wives' conduct and correspondingly wide control over their property and income. It was also commonly accepted that husbands had the right to restrain and, in Blackstone's words, exercise "moderate chastisement" in disciplining wives.[29]

Whatever associations with the idea of marriage lodged in More's mind, she did finally make the decision to renounce Turner—and marriage—and refocus her energies elsewhere. And these, too, could be understood as the actions of a female genius who, checked, still refuses to be immobilized. At this point in her life, More creates a different relationship with herself as subject and finds a different means to contest "those female bonds" by redirecting desire within a different context.

In any event, she turned at this point in her midtwenties to writing and to actively seeking out a patron, ultimately found in the actor/producer David Garrick. With friends and, thanks to Turner, a small income, her efforts paid off, and for some years she appears to have enjoyed a new and also publicly successful life in London, under the artistic and intellectual patronage of Garrick, his wife, and others, like the writer and great eighteenth-century commentator, Samuel Johnson.

Yet what she achieved in this way in terms of forming something new seemingly came with a price. An undercurrent of social unease about clever women like More continued to express itself in mockery of "learned ladies" or "lady scribblers."[30] However warm her friend the Rev. Dr. James Stonhouse might have been in his initial recommendation of her to his friend Garrick as "a young Woman of an amazing Genius," he responds to a

[29] Dale A. Johnson, ed., *Women in English Religion, 1700–1925* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), 241.

[30] Stott notes Fanny Burney's "unsisterly lampooning of Elizabeth Montagu in her unperformed play *The Witlings* (see Stott, *Hannah More*, 51), and the playwright Sheridan's mockery of women playwrights in an epilogue to More's unsuccessful play *The Fatal Falsehood* (Stott, *Hannah More,* 46).

common hesitation about female genius when he adds, as if this was needed, "& remarkable Humility."[31]

Conventions relating to feminine propriety beset her, and she was hard put to defend herself. When she attempted to refute accusations of plagiarism publicly, for example, a fellow writer—Hannah Cowley—accused her of indelicacy and "unsexual hardiness." In sum, though the bluestocking group[32] with which More was associated had tried to encourage the view that women could properly cultivate their intellects, there were clearly still consequences for the women who tried to do so.[33]

By the late 1770s, More seemed a somewhat "troubled soul,"[34] yet one still with an appetite for "strong meat."[35] Perhaps these two characterizations can be reconciled most easily—and related to the idea of female genius—by saying that at this stage More was more realistic about the obstacles she faced as a woman in singular circumstances but no less aware of her own desires, which included a need to feed the life of a serious mind. She had found ways to enjoy the pleasures of thinking and writing and even to secure a degree of love and admiration—in Moi's terms, to seduce by "being interesting"—in her life in London up until this point. Yet, once her friend and patron Garrick died, it seems as if she could no longer sustain herself in this way. Perhaps she began to recognize more clearly that there were always going to be those prettier—if less interesting—whose claims on public admiration would frustrate her own satisfaction. Nevertheless, her capacity to reinvent herself—again female genius seems an appropriate term to describe her ability to form or reform sustaining and satisfying connections and relationships—reasserts itself at this point. She turns back to the resources of her Christian upbringing, now newly enlivened by the energizing challenge of a more radical, evangelical Christian commitment,[36] and forms both the view

[31] Stott, *Hannah More*, 26.

[32] The "bluestocking" assemblies, which reflected in format and makeup the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French salons, were arranged by wealthy and well-connected patrons—Shakespearean critic Elizabeth Montagu being one—to allow a mixed company of similarly well-connected men and women to meet for literary or philosophical readings and discussion, with both entertainment and education as the aim.

[33] Stott, *Hannah More*, 46.

[34] Stott, *Hannah More*, 86.

[35] Stott, *Hannah More*, 80.

[36] E.g., Stott talks about More taking pride in her "growing reputation as 'a rigid Methodist' " at this point in her life. Stott, *Hannah More*, 85.

that "no earthly pleasure can fill up the wants of the immortal principle within"[37] and a new plan, so far as that was possible, to address those wants.

More and Evangelical Christianity

Evangelical faith in Britain at this time reflected theological positions on the corruption of human nature, conversion, and justification derived from the logic of "true Calvinism."[38] There were theological splits and divisions among its various leaders,[39] who were either more or less rigid in their interpretations, but in more general terms evangelical Christianity fostered a practical moral ethos which encouraged people to express genuine repentance for innate sinfulness and for consciously enacted failings by reaching out to the poor in order to improve their lot. In the 1780s, this included the increasingly publicized lot of Africans caught up in the brutality of the slave trade, which comprised much of English commerce at the time. More's involvement with the political campaign against the slave trade—undoubtedly prompted by this evangelical Christianity toward practical penitential morality—is something for which she is still remembered. And, from *Slavery, A Poem*, published in 1788, bringing together Christian thinking with Enlightenment values, to *An Essay on the Character and Practical Writings of Saint Paul*, published nearly thirty years later in 1815, the underlying evangelical inspiration is clear. More continually castigates "persons who, though very spiritual in their conversation, are somewhat selfish in their habits, who talk much of faith, and yet decline the smallest sacrifice of ease; who profess to do all for Christ, but do little for his poor members."[40] More and her sisters clearly dedicated considerable time and energy to, as they saw it, helping Christ's poor members, and in this they were notably alive to the peculiar burdens of other women's lives. In the work Hannah and her sister Patty did supporting the Sunday-school

[37] Stott, *Hannah More*, 80.

[38] Jay, *Religion of the Heart*, 51–105.

[39] E.g., as between the stricter Calvinist position of Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, or George Whitefield—who would have allowed human will and resolution no efficacy in the drama of a limited, predestined human salvation—and the "Arminian" position of Wesley, founder of the Methodists, who argued that the offer of salvation was open to all who professed genuine repentance and sought wholeheartedly to conform their lives to God's will. Stott, *Hannah More*, 81.

[40] Hannah More, *An Essay on the Character and Practical Writing of Saint Paul* (London: Caddell & Davies, 1815), 127.

movement, for example, she paid attention not simply to poor women's needs for Christian instruction but also to their needs for food, childcare, and sickness and maternity benefits.[41] Of course, this attention to Christ's poor members was contingent upon these members being prepared to conform to a fairly rigidly defined established order and to resist anything resembling political or social revolt.

Though More's own conduct might seem robustly independent of men on the domestic front, the content of her thoughts as a Christian ran constantly on ways to maintain the enduring, sustaining, and unchanging nature of God's sovereignty in a far from liberal sense. The idea, for example, of change or transformation in her writing is confined to an unambiguously evangelical understanding of repentance and grace at work in the hearts of sinners. The origins of More's faith may have been derived from the same Calvinist roots as the politically subversive Puritanism of Leade's early years, but in this later era, which saw violent revolution in France completely sweep away the established social order after 1789, its political subversiveness in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England seems pretty much contained. Significantly, More, though an ardent abolitionist, was much more circumspect about the wider revolutionary spirit of the age. In *Slavery*, More distinguishes Liberty, a personification whom she invokes to support the abolitionist cause, from a very different spirit of sedition, and her poem graphically illustrates the fears she holds about the nature of political revolution:

> Thee only, sober Goddess! I attest,
> In smiles chastis'd, and decent graces drest.
> Not that unlicens'd monster of the crowd,
> Whose roar terrific bursts in peals so loud,
> Deaf'ning the ear of Peace: fierce Faction's tool;
> Of rash Sedition born, and mad Misrule. (lines 19–24)

As a female genius, however, her growing concern with evangelical Christianity helped More hold on to two important aspects of her previous life—the lively society of interesting well-connected men and women[42] in the Clapham sect and a context in which to sanctify the pleasurable practice of writing.

[41] Introduction to More, *Strictures on Female Education*, 4.

[42] Jay, *Religion of the Heart*, 46.

In 1795 she began to produce her *Cheap Repository Tracts*. Once again, this venture into popular writing was driven in part by the motivations of evangelical Christianity, seeking to reach out to the—suitably grateful—poor and offer the hope of a transformation of inner as well as material life. More's tracts combined a recommendation to Christian observance among the poor with strong opposition to any more politically unorthodox forms of popular literature,[43] expressing, for example, the views of the deist and Republican Thomas Paine. More had already had some success with a form of more specifically loyalist propaganda—against Paine—in her anonymously published *Village Politics*,[44] so the *Cheap Repository Tracts*—supported by subscriptions—were more of a continuation. They contained rather sentimental and moralistic tales, which tended toward a view of the world in which good was rewarded and evil punished. Servants and the laboring poor were encouraged to participate in faithful Christian worship—attendance at church, keeping the Sabbath, reading the Bible at home—and urged moreover to adopt an ethic of self-help and self-improvement. Yet they were not expected to develop their own initiatives—to hold their own church services or to participate in any form of radicalism that might be thought seriously to threaten the existing social order.[45]

Nevertheless, the tracts were also skillfully and entertainingly written. In other words, More, by adopting a more serious attitude to Christianity, had also secured for herself an assured context for sociability and creative action. Of course, I am not suggesting that her tracts reflect politically—or theologically—liberal views. But perhaps we can say that, even apart from the sense in which her tracts marked a kind of striving after the pleasures of writing and telling stories (as well as the perhaps more questionable practices of pleasing her Clapham friends), this work sets out an innovative social model for wealthy or middle-class women. This model was one in which they could take on public and political responsibilities and view themselves not as less significant components of a marital unit but as capable[46] Christian ministers for whom marriage was not so much forbidden as irrelevant. What compromises her in the eyes of more recent feminist theorists, of course, is the fact that, in spite of the freedoms she and her unmarried sisters embodied, she

[43] Stott, *Hannah More*, 171.

[44] Stott, *Hannah More*, 139.

[45] Stott, *Hannah More*, 182–83.

[46] Hannah More, *Coelebs in Search of a Wife*, introduction by Mary Waldron (London: Caddell & Davies, 1808; repr., London: Thoemmes Press, 1995), 138.

appears to promote uncritically the marital unit as the ultimate goal of a woman's education.

That More was socially conservative and out of sympathy with liberal feminism, not the least in relation to Wollstonecraft, is undeniable. She writes, in correspondence with the writer Horace Walpole, that she is "invincibly resolved" not to read Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication*: "I am sure I have as much liberty as I can make good use of, now I am an old maid, and when I was a young one I had, I dare say, more than was good for me . . . there is perhaps no animal so much indebted to subordination for its good behavior as woman."[47] Even if this is perhaps flirtatious flattery of Walpole's own prejudices, it remains the case that though More is herself an energetic reformer and a prolific and highly successful writer, she is largely unprepared or unable to acknowledge publicly the ways in which patriarchal structures rendered problematic the lives of women who struggled, as she had, against convention. Yet, just because she could be said to be in need of the kind of analysis Beauvoir was later to provide, does this necessarily invalidate her claims to female genius?

Coelebs in Search of a Wife

One way, perhaps, to answer this question is to focus in a little more detail on one of More's most influential publications: *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1808). Ostensibly, *Coelebs* is the fictional account of how a young man of substance and Christian principle goes about finding himself a suitable wife, certainly not an obviously feminist theme! Essentially, it belongs to the genre of "conduct books"[48] that cover many aspects of a wealthy, propertied middle-class life at the beginning of the nineteenth century and the proper Christian way of living.

What does More's involvement with the genre say? Though inspired by the nature of evangelical morality, some of the criticisms More voices do seem grounded in a wider sense of social responsibility. For example, in the course of the book, she launches a literary protest against the rich whose careless failure to pay their bills[49] results in destitution for the tradesperson in question to

[47] Hannah More, quoted in William Roberts, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Mrs. Hannah More*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper Brothers, 1835), 2:372.

[48] Stott notes that the conduct book was a fashionable genre at the time and makes reference to Mr. Collins' attempts to read Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1765)—within the same genre—to the Bennett sisters in Jane Austen's novel, *Pride and Prejudice* (36).

[49] More, *Coelebs*, 52.

whom the debt is owed. In this example, interestingly enough, the tradesperson is a woman who is solely responsible for supporting her family.

The more prominent theme within *Coelebs*, however, is the education of young women. More's mature strictures on female education may well have been formed in response to her own early and unsatisfying experience. However, the view that well-to-do young women were being educated in a way that failed to make them either useful or happy seems to have been a matter of general discussion at the time, finding its way into the work of other writers aside from More, including both Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft. And the very fact that the education of women was being discussed in print around that time is itself some indication that, although there may have been many tacit presuppositions about female gender, there was also some uncertainty and scope for discussion and change.

Wide differences lay, however, in the idealizations that underpinned this discussion and the solutions proposed. In More's case, the increasing importance of evangelical Christianity in her life appears to have made a significant impact on her approach to the question of what girls—in their different social stations—should and should not be taught or encouraged to aim for. Before writing *Coelebs*, More had tried out some ideas on the subject in two conduct books: *Strictures on Female Education* (1799) and *Hints Towards Forming the Character of a Young Princess* (1805),[50] which was so well received[51] that it quickly went into six editions.[52] We have noted already that More seems to adopt a more conservative tone in her literary work than in the independent conduct of her life. But we have also explored the idea that More may have felt that her desire for the life of the mind and for the satisfactions provided traditionally in the separated world of boys and men would lead her fatally to overstep her female bounds. In relation to Moi's treatment of Beauvoir, we have a sense of the scarring this can leave on the lives of highly intelligent young women. In *Strictures* it is then perhaps unsurprising that More appears to endorse—or not actively oppose—the idea of a girl's education for a separate, complementary sphere of life. However, she also writes critically of a double standard at work in these separated worlds:

[50] The princess in question was Charlotte, the only child of the Prince of Wales, who seemed likely to succeed her father as queen until she died in childbirth in 1817.

[51] Although not by the princess herself! Stott, *Hannah More*, 266.

[52] More, *Coelebs*, x.

> It is a singular injustice which is often exercised toward women, first to give them a very defective Education, and then to expect from them the most undeviating purity of conduct;—to train them in such a manner as shall lay them open to the most dangerous faults, and then to censure them for not proving faultless. Is it not unreasonable and unjust to express disappointment if our daughters should, in their subsequent lives, turn out precisely that very kind of character for which it would be evident to an unprejudiced by-stander that the whole scope and tenor of their instruction had been systematically preparing them?[53]

In *Strictures,* she adheres to an evangelical view of the corruption of human nature—and women's special failing of vanity within that[54]—expressing her strong dislike of idleness and shallowness, yet it is still not so much women themselves she blames. Though we might want to criticize her for not being sufficiently ambitious for other women, we can see in what she says in *Strictures* an attempt "to transform the cultural ideal of woman from one who possesses beauty and accomplishment to one who possesses virtue and learning."[55] Or perhaps rather it is an attempt to transform the cultural ideal of a woman from one who simply possesses beauty and accomplishment—as an object for male enjoyment or possession—to one who finds a way to deal with, cope with, and even flourish in circumstances that were, for the majority, sometimes very limited:

> When admirers fall away, and flatterers become mute, the mind will be driven to retire into itself, and if it find no entertainment at home, it will be driven back again upon the world with increased force. Yet forgetting this do we not seem to educate our daughters, exclusively, for the transient period of youth when it is the maturer life we ought to advert? Do we not educate them for a crowd forgetting that they are to live at home? For the world and not for themselves? For show and not for use? For time and not for eternity?[56]

In the introduction to the reprinted 1808–1809 edition of *Coelebs*, Mary Waldron suggests that the conservatism of the book can be explained partly as More's attempt to distance herself as far as possible from the political and religious dissent with which she was unfortunately associated in adverse

[53] More, *Strictures on Female Education*, ix.
[54] More, *Strictures on Female Education*, 65.
[55] Prior, *Hannah More's* Coelebs, 94.
[56] More, *Strictures on Female Education*, 65.

publicity, as a result of what has been called "the Blagdon Controversy."[57] This controversy erupted when More appointed a man of evangelical convictions to her own liking, to be the head teacher of a school she had set up in the village of Blagdon. His behavior—calling unauthorized meetings at which he appeared to take upon himself the spiritual authority of the duly appointed parish clergyman—upset and offended the curate, Thomas Bere. Due in part to the lack of leadership from the bishop and partly, perhaps, to personal animosity between More and Bere, the whole affair was allowed to drag on, becoming increasingly acrimonious as Bere and his party accused More and hers of sponsoring a Calvinist faction within the established Church of England, with the intention of undermining the establishment at a time when revolutionary forces across the English Channel threatened the peace and stability of the nation.[58] But, the Blagdon matter apart, it appears the idea for *Coelebs* dated from some years earlier when Clapham friends asked her to "write some religious and moral novels, stories, tales, call 'em what you will. . . . *The Cheap Repository* tales a little raised in their subjects are the very things."[59]

Coelebs, then, is an interesting book to read as the expression of a woman who clearly wanted recognition from both the evangelical and the literary world; the somewhat conflicted but nevertheless ambitious work of a woman following in the tradition of other novels that in the eighteenth century began to "supplant sermons and other religious works as a possible source of moral instruction for the reading public."[60] But, although the book was extraordinarily successful in terms of both its sales and its absorption into the popular mind-set of the time, More never again attempted to write in this form, and it is possible that the criticism—on literary grounds but also on the grounds of its impropriety—thoroughly discouraged her.[61] The twenty-first-century reader can only again speculate as to the deeper reasons for this discouragement. Quite apart from a natural dislike of criticism which might be shared by any author, More had perhaps hoped *Coelebs* would finally answer both

[57] Stott describes this as the most problematic episode in More's career. Stott, *Hannah More*, 239.

[58] Stott, *Hannah More*, 233–57.

[59] Prior, *Hannah More's* Coelebs, 5.

[60] Carol Stewart, *The Eighteenth-Century Novel and the Secularization of Ethics* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2010), 2.

[61] Stott, *Hannah More*, 279–80.

"her longing for literary fame" and the "narrow code of female modesty"[62] that so often seemed to side with her inner critic. Perhaps in this sense we can suggest that More's claims to the title of female genius are most critically at risk here, too.

By the time More wrote *Coelebs*, she had served a long apprenticeship as a writer and proved her mettle in contexts both critical and popular.[63] Yet *Coelebs* is an extraordinarily dull read! Of course, it is probably true to say that readers today are less impressed or stimulated in general by the moral than by the psychological and that the unique character type has replaced the exemplary character type with which More was clearly much more preoccupied in *Coelebs*.[64] And there is also no doubt that the book was a commercial success at the time. *Coelebs* earned More £2,000 in the first year[65] and within ten years had been translated into both French and German. In cultural terms it had become a reference point for authors from Byron to Charlotte Yonge.[66] More than half a century later, it was still in the mind of Edmund Gosse and Sarah Chauncey Woolsey (Susan Coolidge), who refers to it satirically in chapter one of her children's classic *What Katy Did at School* (1874).[67]

In other words, in terms of the "style" of the century, *Coelebs* and its author made their mark. Nevertheless, it has fared much less well more recently. Though Karen Swallow Prior, for example, defends its place in the history of the novel as a brave attempt to overcome some of the objections,

[62] Stott, *Hannah More*, 13.

[63] Her publications included at this date *The Search After Happiness*, 1762; *The Inflexible Captive*, 1774; *Percy*, 1777; *The Fatal Falsehood*, 1779; *Sacred Dramas* and *Sensibility*, 1782; *Slavery*, *A Poem*, 1788; *Village Politics*, 1793; and *Cheap Repository Tracts*, 1795–1798.

[64] See Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[65] In comparison, e.g., to the mere £350 Jane Austen earned from *Mansfield Park* (Stott, *Hannah More*, 281), a book which Mary Waldron argues embodies Austen's reaction to *Coelebs* (More, *Coelebs*, xxvii–xxviii), presenting a similar set of circumstances in a rather more believable and certainly more entertaining form.

[66] Stott, *Hannah More,* 281–82. Charlotte Yonge's words about *Coelebs* seem considerably softer and more charitable—perhaps not so surprising, given her own conservative approach to the role of women: "To the more seriously disposed persons who barely tolerated fiction of any sort, *Coelebs*, with its really able sketches of character, and epigrammatic turns, was genuinely entertaining and delightful." Charlotte Mary Yonge, *Hannah More* (London: W. H. Allen, 1888), 154.

[67] More, *Coelebs*, xxix–xxviii.

particularly of the evangelicals, to the novelistic form,[68] she notes that even among the reviews it received at the time there were those who thought it sententious. Most would probably agree with Stott when she makes an unflattering comparison between More and her contemporary Jane Austen, an author who ironically enough received much less attention and financial reward from her work at the time:

> The imperatives of a great novel—even one as didactic as *Mansfield Park*—cannot be reconciled with the simplicities of a fictionalized conduct book. If More and Austen seemed at times to be speaking the same moral language, it is because in their critiques of the shallowness of female education and the slick superficiality of metropolitan values they were both part of a wider reaction to romantic individualism, a reaction that extended beyond the Evangelical movement.[69]

Wherein, then, could its claim to mark its author as any kind of female genius lie? To the modern reader it seems deeply unsatisfactory, lacking in dramatic range or variety; there is no misunderstanding, no initial friction between the lovers, no parental disapproval, no dark secret or personal fault to overcome. Yet it is fair to say that the book exceeds the limitations of a conduct book and gives witness to the writer's desires on various levels. For example, it still manages to incorporate—if only implicitly to condemn—"pictures of frivolous society and even perilous intrigue."[70] Even in a highly critical vein, Mary Waldron admits of More, "Such was her literary skill . . . she was able to bring her moral theories to monstrous birth."[71] In other words, More wrote well, and, given that she continued to do so, however she may have been looking over her shoulder for her middle-class evangelical readers' approval, she appears to have found the pleasures of writing sufficiently satisfying to justify

[68] Because the novel as a literary genre was still associated more closely with the torrent of romances and tales of amorous intrigue popularized by the circulating libraries than with the high art of novelists such as Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding, the mixture of the serious subject of religion with such a low form as the novel was controversial at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Prior, *Hannah More's* Coelebs, 7, 35. See also Stewart, *Eighteenth-Century Novel*, 2–3.

[69] Stott, *Hannah More*, 279. This perspective is echoed by Mary Waldron, who suggests More's portrayal of Lucilla Stanley, e.g., would have been an unrealistic model for contemporary women who wanted to do some good in the world. She points to the fate of Dorothea Brooke portrayed with far greater realism in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* by way of illustration. More, *Coelebs*, xxviii–xxix.

[70] Stott, *Hannah More*, 282.

[71] More, *Coelebs*, xxix.

the risks of making a mistake. Allowing for the irritating moralism of certain interludes, many of her characters have color and interest—such as the "modish" dowager Lady Bab Lawless, "famous for laying siege to the heart of every distinguished man with the united artillery of her own wit and her daughters' beauty,"[72] or Lucilla's rather more forthright younger sister Phoebe, whom More allows to suggest that Dr. Barlow's sermon "was rather dull today,"[73] even if she is subsequently chastised and shown the error of her ways.

More also clearly understands the conventions of romantic fiction, even though she employs them very sparingly here. She knows about delicious encounters and the lover's idealization of the beloved. Consider, for example, the sensuality of the cameo in which Charles, the main protagonist, observes his beloved Lucilla, having thrown off her hat, cloak, and gloves, reading from the *Psalms* to a suitably grateful invalid[74] and is cast into raptures that surely go beyond his admiration for her devotion to duty. Lucilla might be figured as a model of filial and Christian piety, but she is still sexually attractive, however More tries to disguise or rationalize the fact.[75] Whatever the moralistic colors in which she paints the virtuous Lucilla, her mother, and her sisters or sets them up to dress down forms of feminine misconduct against which she wishes to warn her readers, the fact is that More had the capacity to bring them to life skillfully when she chose.[76]

Of course, the exemplary woman Lucilla is clearly wearing her author's colors, and, in this respect, the book again becomes difficult to reconcile with the idea of the female genius as a woman who thinks for herself or creates new and innovative relationships with the world—including its gendered limitations—she encounters. Significantly enough, Charles—the "coelebs" or bachelor who is in search of a wife—describes his beloved Lucilla by saying that "contented to please, she has no ambition to shine" and commends her by saying that "she may rather be said to be a nice judge of the genius of others than to be a genius herself."[77] This can hardly be seen as anything

[72] More, *Coelebs*, 42.

[73] More, *Coelebs*, 114.

[74] More, *Coelebs*, 216.

[75] "Lucilla Stanley is rather perfectly elegant than perfectly beautiful. I have seen women as striking but I never saw one so interesting. Her beauty is countenance; it is her stamp of mind intelligibly printed on the face." More, *Coelebs*, 64.

[76] One possibly unintended consequence of this was that it gave encouragement to other women to write. Stott cites, e.g., Mary Martha Sherwood's *The Fairchild Family* (1818) and Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood* (1841). See Stott, *Hannah More*, 282.

[77] More, *Coelebs*, 64.

other than a discouragement to girls and women to become active, passionately curious seekers after new ideas that might lead them into ways of challenging these limiting conventions.

The work in which More's virtuous female characters involved themselves pre-eminently was, of course, the unpaid teaching and charitable work with the (deserving) poor that the rich by birth—she does not address women in her own situation—could afford if they had the inclination, prompted by those of a Christian evangelical persuasion. It is possible, then, to explain some of the irony of More's situation with reference to the evangelical aims with which this novel is suffused. However, in *Coelebs*, the motivation comes, perhaps even more powerfully, from her desire to improve women's education in order to encourage their Christian piety. Of course, the conduct book genre might not seem a particularly fruitful place to begin the discussion of female genius as Kristeva or Battersby understands it, since it would seem that its purpose is to consolidate a set of behaviors and values in a dogmatic sense unfriendly to radical questioning. Yet Stott's account opens up the suggestion that More may in some way have had a wider and possibly wilder ambition.

Although, as Stott puts it, More's idea of fiction changed little from the time she first read Fanny Burney's novels—she thought them in need of more religion—More continued reading works including, in spite of evangelical criticisms of him, those by an author like Shakespeare. It appears that she wrote the novel in some ways as a sort of response to Madame de Stael's *Corinne; ou l'Italie*, which she read in 1808 in an attempt, again, to put the religion back in. Yet, though she may have deplored the "individualistic morality and Rousseauian sensibility" expressed in its pages, she had not, apparently, cast it aside. Perhaps *Coelebs* could be seen as an optimistic attempt to create a form of creative literature that, like the work of Cowper, in More's opinion, satisfied the imagination but could still be "read on a Sunday."[78]

However, for some of More's readers there would clearly have been impropriety in More's direct combination of Christian exhortation and novelistic fiction; for example, in the word-for-word delivery of a sermon—there are several sermons in *Coelebs*—her theological reflections are disguised in a male voice. This far from subtle subterfuge can hardly have endeared More to critics already irritated by her moralizing. One could not perhaps criticize the evangelically correct sentiments expressed by the characters, yet the process

[78] See Stott, *Hannah More*, 272–73.

of writing a novel—however obviously moral in motive—necessarily involves the writer in a whole set of unspoken, deferred, and, at the time, somewhat unconventional tropes of writing and patterns of the imagination that, in a book whose raison d'être was the advancement of a form of (female) piety and good conduct, undoubtedly upset the pious and patriarchal critics.[79]

It may be that we simply have to admit that in *Coelebs* More was crass in imagining that she could repeat the success of the *Cheap Repository Tracts* with a more sophisticated readership. Even more damningly, we may have to accept that she was too anxious to please her evangelical friends and gain their approval by attempting something so obviously doomed to failure. Yet, perhaps we can give her credit for trying in *Coelebs* to stretch the conventions as she attempted to do the unthinkable—engage with practical evangelical theology in order to explore what evangelical Christianity might mean for young middle- and upper-class women of her day. Put in this light, More was again ambitious if conflicted, aspiring not simply to accept the ancillary role she places on the exemplary delicacy of Lucilla Stanley in *Coelebs* but also to influence and drive the pace of both educational and moral reform much more directly herself. Here she not only ventures the suggestion that girls should be taught mathematics and Latin alongside Christian piety as a matter of course but also that she should be allowed to express this point of view in a popularly accessible way.

In sum, there is a great complexity of influences here. Women of More's time were expected to behave in particular ways and were privileged in accordance with certain traditional theological and social agendas. However, it was still possible for women to speak, to find ways of configuring subjectivity in response to circumstances that were not simply about constraint and silence. Of course, this freedom was inequitably distributed. It is clear, for example, that without the annuity paid her by her former suitor William Turner, More would probably have spent the rest of her life in her sisters' classroom. In relation to the question of silence or public speech, moreover, More scrupulously avoided any more public claim, outside the pages of her fiction, to occupy the minister's role of public preaching. However, in the production of essays, poems, tracts, and conduct books, she sought strenuously to sway public opinion in support of her chosen causes, and she has been credited with substantial influence as a writer and figure of the day in effectively promoting and popularizing the evangelical—and in some ways

[79] Stott, *Hannah More*, 278–79.

obviously patriarchal—Christianity that was to became the style of a whole era of colonial British society under Queen Victoria.[80]

In other words, More is a writer but even more fundamentally an evangelical Christian persuaded, like her friend William Wilberforce, that the campaign for the emancipation of slaves to which they were both so notably committed was part and parcel of a much broader vocation to reform or disturb the "manners" of a nation that stood in need of guidance under the judgment of God.[81] To this end More, in an extremely practical way, devoted an enormous amount of her time and energy, for example, to finding support and suitable leadership for a wide network of Sunday schools in the area of provincial England in which she had grown up. In this way, she undoubtedly derived a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction in accordance with her Christian principles.

It is still hard to know, nonetheless, whether this pleasure and satisfaction would have passed muster with Beauvoir or Kristeva, or why, for example, a woman who met and talked so freely with lively intelligent men like Garrick or Johnson should go on to write *Coelebs* as well as other publications—characterized by what Jenny Daggers refers to as "women's spiritual equality and social and sexual subordination"[82]—which tend toward gestures and modes of exchange between God and humankind, men and women, rich and poor, adult and child, educated and less educated that are so static and implicitly hierarchical. Yet More's own life itself remains a very pattern of contestation and adaptive transformation. She may not have provided women with the theoretical justification for involving themselves in public life, but, in achieving this in some ways countercultural status herself, she was arguably contributing to the same process of change as the more liberal Wollstonecraft, for example.

More's claim to genius encounters resistance, however, because, as she grows older and in spite of her own in some ways unconventional path in life, she continues to restate the conventions that promote a limited, restrictive view of the proper education and behavior of girls and women. More, through her writing, sometimes appears quite overtly to discourage women from challenging the limitations of gender, preferring, on paper at any rate, that they embrace them in a spirit of evangelical piety that is strongly colored

[80] Stott, *Hannah More*, 336.

[81] Stott, *Hannah More*, 95.

[82] Jenny Daggers, *The British Christian Women's Movement: A Rehabilitation of Eve* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2002), 7.

by an idealized form of womankind that Daggers traces back to Milton's Eve. Daggers suggests that this picture represents a "powerful expression of post-Reformation Protestant consciousness,"[83] perhaps even a form of compensation for the loss of Catholic Mariology as a component of all previous patriarchal Christian constructions of womanhood. Sean Gill, as well, illustrates how a whole mood or style of "spiritual womanhood" was created within the Church of England in the early nineteenth century, reflecting a view, picked up by William Wilberforce himself, that women's civilizing effect on their husbands and children included their ability to awaken or reawaken them to their spiritual paths.[84]

Coelebs is in some ways the perfect illustration of both these ideas. With an extended introductory panegyric on Milton's Eve,[85] the book also contains the story of the exemplary Mrs. Carlton, who embodies this Wilberforcian ideal of women taking responsibility for their husbands' spiritual well-being. She is described within *Coelebs* as a woman who has accepted her role as loving wife in a relationship entered into simply in obedience to her mother's wish. She puts up with her husband's indifference, irresponsibility, and emotional cruelty with a patience that is, according to the narrator who we have to assume is More herself, inspired by her Christian piety. Eventually, inevitably in terms of the idealization which is being brought into play here, his heart is changed.[86]

In this portrait, More at one and the same time denies female autonomy—since it presupposes that a woman is bound to act toward her husband with loving concern even when he is cruel—while implicitly making her responsible for the reformation of his character. The blushing eighteen-year-old Lucilla compounds this view—which throws the burden of a man's brutal behavior onto his suffering wife's fragile back—by applauding Mrs.

[83] Daggers, *British Christian Women's Movement*, 5.

[84] Sean Gill, *Women and the Church of England from the 18th Century to the Present* (London: SPCK, 1994), 80–83.

[85] "I confess that, as the Sophia of Rousseau had her young imagination captivated by the character of Fenelon's Telemachus, so I early became enamoured of that of Milton's Eve. I never formed an idea of conjugal happiness, but my mind involuntarily adverted to the graces of that finished picture." More, *Coelebs*, 9.

[86] "His behavior to his amiable wife was affectionately attentive. . . . It appeared to be the result of esteem inspired by her merit, and quickened by a sense of his own former unworthiness, which made him feel as if he could never do enough to efface the memory of past unkindness." More, *Coelebs*, 149.

Carlton's conduct as a "triumph of religion"[87] because it is achieved against any initial natural feeling of love or affection for him.

Another troubling reading of the book is that, while her Christian convictions fired More's tireless efforts to oppose government policies on the slave trade and to set up Sunday schools, actively protesting against and contesting with those people who stood in her way, the figure of Lucilla that *Coelebs* idealizes as the model of young Christian womanhood tends toward a more or less silent attentiveness to the public words of men. However, Lucilla's public reticence is accompanied by energetic activity: teaching, preparing food, visiting the sick, advising and overseeing the servants—for the benefit of her family and the poor. More might have imagined this character as the idealized picture of her own life had the unsatisfactory Mr. Turner proved to have had more grit. Given that the cadences of acceptable female conduct with which More had been brought up from childhood find strong theological justification in the evangelical piety of the piece, perhaps the picture of her Lucilla is meant to be the "heroine" of *Coelebs* in ways that mirror the perfections of Milton's Eve without her subsequent failings and in this way forms an evangelical attempt to redeem her.

Kristeva, as both novelist and psychotherapist, places a high value on the narrative, novelistic form as a place where "drive and meaning, unconscious and conscious, somatic and symbolic"[88] could be said to meet and where the novelist, in carnivalesque mode, might bring together variant voices, modes of being, and desires. More, of course, does not write in the vein of Kristeva's favored avant-garde writers—Artaud, Joyce, or even Colette—yet the very process of writing a story necessarily entails the bringing together of diverse and even discordant strands of thought and experience in order to weave any kind of plot allowing author and reader alike to wander and wonder, to "test the upheavals of their age"[89] and of their own psyches. It has to be said that More—as author—appears to be extremely vigilant to the point of an almost lethal limitation of plot. However, she does not seem constrained by her Christian commitment to give up creative writing. The movement from verse and tragedy to tracts—of various levels of sophistication and with different target readers, admittedly—surely continues to reflect for More a process of creativity that expresses itself in new kinds of relationships and an engagement of the embodied mind.

[87] More, *Coelebs*, 85.

[88] Kristeva, *Hannah Arendt*, 47.

[89] Kristeva, *Colette*, 5.

It is undoubtedly much harder to read in *Coelebs*—this somehow off-putting fictionalized conduct book—the stirrings of desire, anxiety, and pleasure that are so evident in the sensuous prose of Colette's novels, for example, or even the wide-ranging and daring philosophy of Arendt or the innovative psychoanalysis of Klein, but it remains the case that More is a writer and that, in *Coelebs* as in many of her other literary works, she provides us with a succession of pictures of lives and lifestyles of town and country, of eating and drinking, of dining rooms and libraries and books and gardens and sick rooms, of conversations between young and old and between men and women, of flowers and trees and animals that betoken a free-ranging imagination and lively engagement with a reality that contrasts with the idealized narrative of patriarchal perfection and spiritual womanhood. Perhaps, as a writer taken up with the craft of poetry and the love of resonant sound and rhythm from an early age, she does in some ways overcome the contemporary gender stereotypes of the age in order to give expression to the sensuality of flesh and word in which her writing is rooted.

Hannah More is a difficult case because she is not a figure with any pretensions to liberal politics or theology. And yet she cannot merely be dismissed as a female collaborator with patriarchal society or on the grounds of bad faith, as Simone de Beauvoir might have understood it, because—her actions speaking louder than her words—she too demonstrates ways in which to achieve subjectivity in a singular life, resisting the limitations imposed on her by her context, bringing creative work to birth, finding pleasure in words and work. Of course, More's shortcomings are much in evidence: her sometimes crippling anxiety about overstepping the conventions of female behavior have their effect on her literary career, and perhaps, had she been more of a female genius, she might have resisted more strenuously the temptations to conform and impose limitations on her own literary expression. Yet these real shortcomings do not absolutely disqualify a woman who in many other ways lived her life and achieved a sense of her own singular subjectivity as a woman for whom Christian faith served both to empower and strengthen her resolve to overcome the limitations of her context.

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6

Maude Royden

Christ said to us "Be ye perfect." He spoke not only to the Apostles, nor only to a nation, nor only to a sex. He said to every man and woman in the world, "Be ye perfect." In what sense did he say it? Did he say, "In those virtues which become your class," or "your sex"? He said "be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

—Sheila Fletcher, *Maude Royden*

Moving beyond More

Maude Royden is another Christian woman with insights on the topic of female genius at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. In many ways she seems an amalgam of Hannah More and her character Lucilla Stanley: born into a wealthy family, she was given a university education in which she excelled not simply in her studies but in debating and play reading and acting.[1] Once she finished her education, however, her first thought was to serve the poor. There was no ardent Coelebs pressing his suit for her, but there was an opening at the Victoria Women's Settlement in Liverpool, her home city, where she helped with the kinds of gender-inflected activities the settlement provided for the impoverished local population, from girls' clubs to visiting the sick and helping in the dispensary staffed by a

[1] Sheila Fletcher, *Maude Royden: A Life* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 26–27.

resident female doctor. She also spent a good deal of time in "provident collecting" to fund the work.[2]

However, Royden was soon aware that women like herself needed something rather more than the kind of guidance provided in More's book for Lucilla by pious parents and an attentive local clergyman to deal effectively with the demands of "unruly slum girls and difficult colleagues."[3] She felt herself to be very unprepared and wrote to a friend that she wished she could have undertaken the kind of more systematic and professional training already being provided for women working, for example, in the Lady Margaret Hall Settlement in London under the auspices of the Charity Organisation Society.[4] Obviously women's involvement in concern for the poor had moved on since the time of Hannah More and taken on something of a more structured and professional character, but it is equally probable that the work of More and others like her had played its part in bringing about some of these changes.

In terms of her Christian affiliation, Royden was influenced not by the dissenting and evangelical theology that had claimed More's loyalty but by the legacy of Tractarianism and the Anglo-Catholic revivalism of the Oxford Movement, whose effects were still apparent in the Church of England more than sixty years after the first *Tracts for the Times* were published in 1833. The Oxford movement, of which the publications of tracts was perhaps the opening salvo, sought to reconnect the Church of England, if not with the administrative and theological authority of Pope and Curia in nineteenth-century Europe—though this was a path followed by some—then certainly with the authoritative theological and liturgical roots of the pre-Reformation Catholic tradition. When Royden was a student, she certainly saw herself as belonging to this party, reading the five volumes ofHenry Liddon's *Life of Edward Bouverie Pusey*—one of the key Tractarians, identifying herself as an Anglo-Catholic "Ritualist," and often attending the church of the Puseyite Cowley Fathers in Oxford.[5]

As a woman, however, Royden passionately resisted the patriarchal ideology so powerfully influential upon elements of the Church of England's practice and ethos at the time. In this sense, the Anglo Catholics in the Church of England were not noticeably more liberal when it came to the

[2] Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, 35.
[3] Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, 34.
[4] Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, 35.
[5] Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, 27.

"woman question" than their more Protestant fellow Anglicans. As an adult and a writer, for example, Royden clearly understood that it was members of her own church just as much as outsiders who were trying to impose their patriarchal idealizations on her life, frustrating her ambition—as female genius—both to love and to take up a profession that moved beyond the kind of part-time and amateur charitable work More had approved for women. Royden had her eyes on the kind of church leadership roles for which women could be trained and held accountable alongside men, and, although she failed to achieve her aims in this respect, she directed her energies into the production of a considerable body of work—essays, books, lectures, articles, and sermons—in which she was able to transform or circumvent creatively those obstructive patriarchal idealizations both in what she said and by the very fact that she said it.

In the context of the time, she was a very privileged woman. Although there were still very few career paths for someone in her position to follow outside marriage and motherhood, once she had finished her degree program and passed her exams,[6] Royden was able and personable and, with a good circle of influential friends and contacts, she managed to make her way. Sometimes she worked for money and sometimes as a volunteer as a parish worker or, for a while, as a lecturer within the Oxford extension scheme. Her family wealth sustained her in her single life and also allowed her to devote time to causes, notably women's suffrage and pacifism. In time she became a public figure, constantly writing, speaking, and lecturing both at home and abroad, and her views and opinions on Christianity and politics were published in popular daily papers. She was a wholehearted supporter of the cause of women's ordination and, in 1917, the first Anglican woman publicly to preach in a church.[7] She was a Christian writer and radical of the early twentieth century known to many of the great and the good of her time.

To date, however, only one full-length biography has been written—by Sheila Fletcher (1989)—and her published work is largely out of print. Otherwise, there are a few scattered references to her in more recent books about the history of women in the context of the British churches. But this does not mean that her contribution was slight, second rate, or quickly superseded by

[6] Women at Oxford University were still formally unable to graduate at that time.

[7] She undertook a series of sermons within the nonconformist City Temple in London. Although she was herself an Anglican, the Church of England was still at this time adamantly opposed to women preaching inside its churches.

more able writers. Certainly, in terms of a politics of memory and in search of female genius, her life and work are well worth further exploration.

Sex and Common-Sense

In 1921 Royden gave a series of public lectures that were subsequently published as a book, *Sex and Common-Sense*. The theme and Royden's treatment of her topic reveal a good deal about blinkered perceptions of both gender and sex at the time. This was particularly relevant in 1921, perhaps because, for various reasons including the toll taken on the lives of young men during the First World War, an imbalance in the population had occurred between men and women. There were, in fact, too few men to go around in a context in which heterosexual monogamy was still overwhelmingly regarded as the ideal for both sexes—though this was not necessarily to say it accorded exactly with what was actually happening. At the time, most people would have pitied a woman who was unable to fulfill this domestic vocation, thinking it was a waste or even a matter of shame.[8]

Royden writes her lectures in the knowledge that some younger women were beginning to ignore the limitations laid down by Christian tradition and social custom and to make their own arrangements about sex and motherhood.[9] Clearly this had caused consternation among some Christians at the time, a number of whom had been quick to condemn this behavior as immoral. Royden speaks up with furious indignation on behalf of those, including herself, who *had* conformed to the church's teaching about sex and marriage. The church had certainly benefited from what Royden viewed as their sacrifice. Deprived of partners and children against their dearest hopes—it should be said that Royden does not seem interested in championing gay women in this context—Royden characterizes these women as consciously channeling their affectivity and sexual energy into all kinds of voluntary church work. And yet this sacrifice was going unnoticed and unrewarded, except sometimes by the cruelest kind of mockery that suggested their unmarried condition was merely the result of their failure to be sufficiently desirable to men.[10]

[8] Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, 117.

[9] Emboldened perhaps by the dawning recognition of their new status when women (over the age of thirty) gained the vote in 1918.

[10] Maude A. Royden, *Sex and Common-Sense* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1922), 8.

The limitations faced by these young Christian women were mirrored—for different reasons—in Royden's own life at the time when she was writing these lectures. From the account she wrote later,[11] it is clear that she was, by then, very much in love with her future husband Hudson Shaw who was, at the time, still married to someone else. Royden struggled to resolve the situation. On the one hand, she was not prepared to put pressure on Shaw to break up his marriage, nor, for fully considered reasons of Christian morality, would she propose any kind of adulterous affair. On the other hand, her very keen sense that she had sacrificed the desirable end of marriage with Shaw for the exigencies of others, including the church, was made even harder to bear by the church's refusal to accept what she saw as her vocation to Christian leadership simply because she was a woman.

In the 1920s women's leadership roles in the Church of England still did not include priestly ministry or preaching within the delimited "sacred spaces" of chancel and pulpit. So when, at the beginning of *Sex and Common-Sense*, Royden talks about "humanity's needs"[12] or about framing an authoritative morality for "ourselves,"[13] she must have been well aware that some people would find her implicit claim to Christian leadership in these words difficult to accept. Questions about the authority of women to ask questions publicly or to attempt to provide answers about Scripture, theology, or the church were still answered with reference to the biblical injunctions against women taking an authoritative position over men. Attitudes in the Church of England in 1921 were beginning to change, including a greater preparedness to use Royden's energy and effectiveness as a preacher. But the scope of her involvement remained constrained on gender-based grounds, and it seems very likely that these lectures on the theme of Christianity and sex in 1921 address not simply a matter of wider concern to the Church of England at the time but also a very personal sense of frustration and disenfranchisement felt by Royden herself.[14]

At the same time, of course, as in the case of Leade and more particularly More, Royden's deference to the authority of a Christian church in such apparent harmony with normative patriarchy raises a question particularly for feminists. Once again, what is the scope here for the kind of female genius

[11] Maude A. Royden, *A Threefold Cord* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1947).

[12] Royden, *Sex and Common-Sense*, 8.

[13] Royden, *Sex and Common-Sense*, 5.

[14] Anglican women were no longer disbarred from serving on Anglican Parochial Church Councils on the same terms as men after the 1919 Enabling Act.

who engages and struggles with normative structures so as to rethink social and literary forms? The church in this context voices ideological patriarchal thinking that seems preoccupied with limiting her fields of action. Yet, arguably, it could be said that Royden does fight and struggle to escape its diminishing expectations. She was a female genius in the business of transforming perceptions of what was owed to her and others as women. She demonstrated her genius in voicing her challenge to limited expectations in the strength of her ambition as a singular woman. In so doing, she may well have helped open the way to further transformations in the ways in which women could conceive of themselves and what they might achieve.

Maude Royden and Passionate Celibacy

Female genius is a term that describes how a woman brings the totality of who she is and what she wants to bear upon the world in which she finds herself, and female genius is marked by a refusal to bracket off aspects of desire as too female or feminine. As a liberal "first-wave" feminist, very different from Leade or More, Royden objects to and challenges the prohibition on her official role in the church primarily as a matter of discrimination that denies her equal capacity to do her job alongside men. Royden puts her mind to fighting this discrimination in a public sense. In 1921, Royden was rejoining battle within the Church of England, having helped to achieve success in earlier suffrage campaigns. She drew on that experience to convince people that a woman could and indeed needed to make political choices to speak and act just as a man did. Some of her fellow Anglicans—in spite of the changes to the civil laws on suffrage—still vehemently opposed the idea that it was right or even possible for a woman to speak on her own behalf in public or in church.[15]

In these circumstances, against official and clerical voices within the church, Royden finds her justification for speaking out in the Gospels. She is highly sensitized to the ways in which man-made discriminations or hierarchies give some people power over others and regards this as the attempt to

[15] "No doubt a woman's voice must be heard in these 'modernist' days. . . . But all this is unofficial. . . . The really pleasant and devout communicant does not speak where she has any single man (brother, husband or father) to be her spokesman." Attributed to "one who signed himself 'A Lover of St Paulos' in the *Challenge.*" Fletcher, *Maude Royden*, 144.

limit what might be called a God-given equal opportunity policy. In *Sex and Common-Sense*, for example, Royden says,

> When people speak as though it were one of the weaknesses of Christianity that it appeals, or seems to appeal, more to women than to men, I ask you to believe that sometimes consciously, often quite unconsciously, women respond with passionate gratitude to Christ, because of His sublime teaching that every human soul was made for God, and that no part or section of society, no race, no class and no sex, was made for the convenience of another.[16]

Royden argues that differences between men and women are commonly exaggerated by those intent on their own advantage. *Sex and Common-Sense* begins, for example, with a critique of gender stereotypes: Why is it somehow acceptable for men to have sexual needs and even to satisfy them through exploiting women as prostitutes, while women's sexual needs are denied? Or, if they are not denied, why are they thought to be less intense? Royden is certainly aware of the ways in which gender is constructed in relation to specific social and especially sexual practices in the interests of shoring up patriarchal structures, even though she does not yet have the advantage of Beauvoir's elegantly expressed philosophical analysis to explain why this pattern is so hard to shift. Crucially, she also understands that the Christian church has helped to police these structures. Like more contemporary feminist theorists, she could see that patriarchal Christianity and society at large often acted in concert to control women through their sexuality—arbitrarily determining what counted as appropriate behavior in terms of a conformity that was incompatible with any woman's ambition to take on a significant leadership role.

Was Royden's confidence in the rationality and goodness of a creator God justified? What is more easily gauged is that her claim for justice and the equality of the sexes within the context of church life was rooted in the circumstances of her life with its singular ambitions and frustrations—the church's refusal to acknowledge her vocation and the pressure to see herself as a failure in sexual terms. What is also clear is that she accords to her own singular and "impossible dialectics"[17] a powerful authorization as is only to be expected from the female genius. In continually challenging the rules, she is in dialogue with pleasures and pains rooted in her embodied experience as a woman frustrated yet still working to find a better means of representing

[16] Royden, *Sex and Common-Sense*, 31.

[17] Cecilia Sjöholm, *Kristeva & the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 50.

who she is or is not—a more satisfying symbolization that fully acknowledges, with reference to Kristeva, her "maternal position" and her condition of embodiment between "nature and culture." So she writes about a God who creates and rules according to a divinely compassionate egalitarianism, mirroring her own ambition.

The Christian position equates to a "common sense" as Royden understands it. The wisdom of Jesus disallows discrimination and injustice against women, not as a principle or rule but in relation to a quality of human—male and female—intuition, understanding, and empathy most perfectly exemplified in the incarnation. Jesus' understanding of the human heart is not some sort of esoteric knowledge only available to God but is akin to the "common" aspirations of ordinary men and women, as Royden accounts herself ordinary. Speaking from outside the institutional framework, Royden's view reflects a vote of confidence in her own genius, challenging that which seeks to silence her and fails in its symbolic representation to acknowledge and account fully for the sources of her frustration or the means to satisfy her longings.

She gives expression to all this in an implicit polarity between what she calls "religious people" and her own very liberal interpretation of the gospel that appears so different from the understanding of human depravity toward which Hannah More's evangelical Christianity had tended. "Religious people do sometimes think such mean things of human nature, and human nature is, for the most part, so much nobler, so much more loyal, so much more loving than we imagine."[18] Royden writes that men and women have an equal vocation to Christlike perfection.[19] But, although this perfection is determined by the example of Christ, for Royden Christ's exemplary actions and words themselves reflect a common sense of what is right and appropriate. So much, then, is clear: Royden rebelliously rejects the judgment of the Church that she is unworthy, and this judgment goes against what she understands as common sense and is a matter of out-and-out patriarchal discrimination. If confirmation is needed, it is there in the Gospels. Of course, it is also true that Royden's opinions on sexual morality and marriage are consistent with the church's teachings. But once again, these rulings are only authoritative for her because they are consistent with her common sense rather than because they represented some existing social or cultural

[18] Royden, *Sex and Common-Sense*, 134.
[19] Royden, *Sex and Common-Sense*, 145.

norm. Of course, female genius in this context lies in being able to discriminate—to know or perceive what makes sense and what does not in conditions designed to undermine our confidence, invoking the whole embodied process of symbolic representation as one that crucially relies on a *connection* between body and mind, sexuality and thought, politics and pleasure, affect and representation.

In *Sex and Common-Sense*, Royden argues that sex and marriage belong together. But her reasons, seen in context, still strike the rebellious note. They are not the reasons typically put forward in defense of restrictive sexual practices based on patriarchal notions of property or propriety, male honor, or hatred of the body, for example. Rather, she produces an utterly scathing critique of people in the churches who loudly claim the moral high ground on adultery and sex before marriage but fail to address the appalling ignorance about sex that plagued the lives of many very ill-prepared young people coming forward for marriage, creating a burden of shame and misery that blighted entire lives.

At a time when bodies and sex remained taboo subjects for a great many people, Royden boldly claimed that, far from being a matter of shame, a sexual act between two equal partners partook of divine creativity. And her view that it is sex that makes marriage real rather than marriage that legitimates sex represents a heady theological ambition to make more of both sex and marriage. Of course, from a twenty-first-century perspective, her view of sex still looks discriminatory—for one thing, it is distinctly heterosexist.[20] But it is perhaps unfair to condemn Royden too harshly, though it is also a salient indication that—genius or no—she had not found all the answers.

Royden's situation in 1921 was complex, although not totally without advantage. Hudson Shaw would not divorce his vulnerable and dependent wife, which, in any case, would have cost him his job. It seems clear nonetheless that he was very much attracted to Royden and that under different circumstances he would certainly have married her. The church would not ordain or pay Royden, but it still provided her with a great deal of work and interest and some unofficial position and influence that she might well have had to give up had she married. Moreover, as a woman of means, she did not need to be married for financial reasons. Finally, though Royden was sufficiently interested in being a mother to adopt a daughter, it appears that

[20] "The creative power of physical passion remains at once its justification and its consecration. To use it in a relationship which must forever be barren is 'unnatural' and in the deepest sense immoral." Royden, *Sex and Common-Sense*, 147.

the Shaws' experience of pregnancy and childbirth had been so traumatic for both of them that Hudson might have had issues about having further children even if he had been able to marry Royden when she was young enough. Moreover, she retained Shaw's lifelong unwavering interest and support at the same time as she had the freedom to think and write, largely uninterrupted by the demands of a larger family or a husband.[21]

Nevertheless, Royden's commitment to both the Anglican Church and to Hudson Shaw's personal and professional well-being must have taken a heavy toll on a young, ambitious, and vital life. Her—arguably creative—solution in the circumstances was to adopt a celibacy as passionate as the "sex-instinct." In this way she effectively set up a challenge to the limited order of choices recognized for women within the Church of England of her time. Most of all, she rejected the patronizing, belittling description of the single woman as an "old maid," with its implications of underdeveloped or dried-up sexlessness. Instead, in *Sex and Common-Sense* she celebrates celibacy and celibate women. If the church denied her vocation to preach on the same terms as authoritative men and if circumstances frustrated her ambitious view of sexual love, she could defiantly honor her sexuality and that of many other women in equally limited circumstances by its renunciation, claiming no less a figure than Jesus himself as the sponsor of her "glorious celibacy."

Once again, however, Royden presents her choice of celibacy not as a rule to be imposed either on herself or on others but as a voluntary sacrifice. In 1947 Royden made her own celibacy a matter of public record in the book *A Threefold Cord*, showing how she had tried to maintain a praxis of renunciation consistent with her argument of twenty years earlier that passionate celibacy was not merely a craven, defeated acceptance of the limitations imposed on single women by a church that had continually demonstrated its contempt for them by refusing formally to acknowledge their ministry.

She continued to express the view that both her public ministry on behalf of the church and her relationship with Shaw remained a source of energy in her life and that she was not in denial about the character of her feelings for him.[22] Moreover, in celebrating celibacy, she manages an ambitious

[21] Royden's memoir *A Threefold Cord* recounts her long-term association with both Hudson Shaw and his wife Effie. She explains that she and Hudson, in full acknowledgement of their love for each other, waited until Effie died before getting married. They were married on October 2, 1944. Shaw died about two months later.

rebelliousness, particularly in the face of the dominant patriarchal, heterosexist ideology that abjects the single, sexually unavailable woman, by boldly aligning herself with the struggle of the saints throughout Christian history against convention and social conformity, thus bringing about a transformation in the way in which we conceive or think of the role of a woman, the nature of love, and the life of the mind.

Conclusion

Of course, at a time when sex was beginning to be discussed with more frankness and openness in some circles,[23] Royden's choices appeared naïve and timid, as they perhaps do today. Her feminist contemporary Dora Russell, for example, argues that the traditional attitude to marriage is "wrong from top to bottom," and she identifies the Christian church as the primary source of an unrealistically ideal and highly punitive sexual ethic.[24] It is not hard to see how she interpreted Royden's choices and why she found her Christianity difficult to accept. Yet Royden is committed to a view that both marriage and celibacy represent genuine choices for passionate living and that, for all that it may represent a very real sacrifice, celibacy is in no sense a second-order

[22] After Shaw and his wife Effie had died, she revealed how she and Shaw had corresponded about their love for each other for decades without ever becoming lovers in a sexual sense. In one letter Shaw told her, "Yesterday was a hell of depression. . . . Do you know what it is to me, at times like these, not to be with you, not to greet you on the morning of your birthday, not to share your joy? Others may. I may not, though I am nearest to you and I know you want me." Royden, *A Threefold Cord*, 71.

[23] Simply considering what was being published in Britain around the period in which *Sex and Common-Sense* first appeared, it is clear that people were becoming familiar with "sex" as a controversial subject. Henry Havelock Ellis had already published the six volumes of his provocative *Social Psychology of Sex* between 1897 and 1910. Three years before the publication of *Sex and Common-Sense*, in a more populist and evangelical vein, the Scottish-born scientist and feminist Marie Stopes had published *Married Love*, which sold 2,000 copies in two weeks and went through five reprints in the same year. Five years later, in 1926, D. H. Lawrence would write the first version of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, a novel notoriously explicit about sex, while Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) explored the tragic reality of love in a world of much greater sex and gender ambiguity than conventional morality was prepared to admit.

[24] "If you take the extreme traditional religious view of marriage, her sole right would have been not to marry, to have remained celibate. Once married, she would be obliged to accept all the consequences; the worse the consequences were, the more noble she would be for accepting them, and so on." Dora Russell, "Marriage," *The Guildhouse Monthly: Organ of the Fellowship Guild*, October 1927, 46.

vocation or an indication of defeat and failure but rather a genuine—she might term it Christlike—alternative.

It is then possible to read *Sex and Commonsense* as the work of a female genius, particularly when it is studied in conjunction with the 1947 essay *A Threefold Cord*. It seems to express Royden's longing for the sexually substantiated marriage of equals, as well as for the church to recognize her vocation to Christian ministry on the same terms as a man—neither of which she lived to experience. But it is still possible to claim that, in telling her story, she contests the limitations imposed by convention and in some ways recasts relationships and ideas in ways to suit herself.

Her curiosity and rebelliousness drive her to seek out answers that do not simply silence her but serve in some way to satisfy positively her passionate nature. She pursues single-mindedly, for example, the question of why the church would not let her take a leading role, and she finds her answers in yet more questions about what it really means to be a woman. Her claim to female genius lies, I believe, in the way that she allows her readers to conceive more clearly the creative potential of a new theology that consistently connects body and mind, affect and representation, pleasure and politics, and a new philosophy that does not see God as a masculine idealization of creativity but locates the divine in the creativity of each singular life marked by embodiment, affectivity, and representation.

Christianity entrusted to male interpreters in patriarchal societies is likely to produce work that "forgets" women's roles and significance in the past and is unlikely to think creatively or ambitiously about their contribution in the present and future. Having fought the campaign for women's suffrage, Royden was well equipped to recognize sexism for what it was and was not so easily confused by attempts to mystify gender roles. And yet she does not deal with the problematics of sexism within the church, any more than with sexism in the British constitution, by abandoning the institution or even its inconvenient rules but by continuing to contest or engage with them at every opportunity. Her motivation comes undoubtedly in one sense from her understanding of the gospel as a divinely sanctioned vision of human equality rather than of hierarchy, but clearly it also comes from a consciousness of her own rage, ambition, and curiosity in seeking out the pleasures of writing and thinking and publicly performing the maternal position that links contestation and revolt with the pleasures of representation.

7

Michèle Roberts

Then it seemed to her she was in her cell, watching the cocoon crack open.
Out struggled a creature with great wet, dragging wings that were stuck
together. It twitched and flared. Shook out flags of
billowing colour, reared its head . . . she woke up screaming,
convinced she was going to die. Not a nightmare but real. The great wings
beating above her, the hot pulse of its desire, so close,
the fireball eyes staring into hers.
The butterfly filled the tiny room. It trembled. It was ready.
At last she realised it had come out of herself.

—Michèle Roberts, *Impossible Saints*

Early Years

Michèle Roberts was born in 1949 and brought up in the London suburb of Edgware. The daughter of a French Roman Catholic mother and an Anglican father, she attended Roman Catholic schools in London before going to university in Oxford in 1967 to study English literature. After graduating, she intended to train as a librarian, but instead she fell in love with feminism and committed herself to the life of a writer and feminist activist in London.[1] She has written fourteen novels, three collections of poetry, a play, and two

[1] Michèle Roberts, *Paper Houses: A Memoir of the '70s and Beyond* (London: Virago, 2007), 35.

works of nonfiction. She won the Booker Prize in 1992 for *Daughters of the House* and was made *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French government. She is emeritus professor of creative writing at the University of East Anglia, UK. She is presented here as a case study for female genius—as previously defined—in respect of her life, her literary work, and what I would describe as her theology.

The idea of the female theologian continues to be problematic to some degree; Christian theology, it seems, has always been the province of the institutionally commissioned or ordained male leader or the divinely inspired male scholar,[2] and a woman's place, according to this view, is not to teach or have authority over men nor to tell the powerful theological story for herself. She had better confine herself to literature, for example, an acceptable field for women, according to some views, precisely because literature has been seen to require the guiding masculine hand of theology or philosophy to gain legitimacy.[3] However, within a theological culture that continues to be viewed as normatively male, even if less so than in the past, Roberts exemplifies the female genius who works and creates in pursuit of her desires—including her desire to understand and communicate her reflections on God—without bracketing off all she is as a woman.

Roberts exemplifies Kristeva's view that values are not static or frozen standards but that it is in the process of tending to the—maternally instigated—capacity for thought by calling standards into question, whether on the level of the individual's psychic life or in relation to societies at large, that they acquire "a sense of mobility, polyvalence and life."[4] So, in Roberts' novels and poetry, prefaces and introductions, as well as in her autobiographical *Paper Houses* (2007), she generates a sense of mobility, polyvalence, and life by vigorously challenging what she experiences as the static immobility of traditional institutions—for example, patriarchal attitudes toward women as they are enshrined within the Roman Catholic Church's teaching and

[2] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza is, of course, one feminist scholar who has sought to reread this historical assumption in her work on the history of early Christianity with a focus on egalitarian narratives within New Testament traditions relating to Jesus' own ministry and teaching. See *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

[3] Heather Walton, *Imagining Theology: Women Writing and God* (London: T&T Clark Theology, 2007), 34–48.

[4] Julia Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*, trans. Brian O'Keeffe (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2002), 12.

practice. Her singular practices of writing question Catholicism's theological structures and cast the nature of God's relationship with the world in terms of conceptual and social relationships that she fashions for herself as a woman. She questions notions of God as disembodied male and the body as sacrificial, expendable, and female, through the sensual evocations of carefully crafted words that produce, for example, a God who is "not Father, not Lord and King" but "blackness, darkness, sweetness, limited to no one shape but part of everything."[5]

Roberts' representation of God distances her, to some extent, from more malestream Christian fixations on patristic disputes colored by classical philosophy in particular, but it is still rooted in her protagonists' and her own childhood memories of Catholic worship "with its brilliantly-lit choir slung with gleaming lamps, its gaudy plaster and gilt decoration, its shrill-voiced choir . . . its hideous and lifelike crucifix whose Christ drew your eyes with his nailed body arched and twisted in agony."[6] Yet what is important to note here is that the values of the past are not being swept away in individualistic, solipsistic disregard but are rigorously interrogated in the light of a different kind of community, one that includes rather than excludes women and what they have been cast to represent within a masculinist economy.

It is not simply because she identifies herself as a feminist, challenging patriarchal Christianity, that she is here accounted as a female genius. It is rather to claim her as such because, in a context within which she is primed to respond in accordance to values and frameworks—be they Roman Catholic, masculinist, bourgeois—she brings something new to birth through the exercise of thought, bringing values into question in a process in which her female, embodied desire has not been bracketed off from the start. Writing in the "white heat" of early second-wave feminist thinking, Roberts has a different take on Christianity from earlier women and some sharp new analytic tools to use. But I would argue that the nature of her female genius does not depend on her specific character as "feminist."

Aligning myself with Kristeva and against Beauvoir's postponement of women's claim to genius,[7] my argument is that the achievements of women cannot be reduced to mirroring and silence, even within the especially contentious context of Christian theology. By writing novels with identifiably

[5] Michèle Roberts, *Impossible Saints* (London: Virago, 1998), 182.

[6] Roberts, *Impossible Saints*, 182.

[7] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1972), 723.

Christian themes, Roberts gives herself room to look at what is at stake. Her embodiment and desire are brought into focus in order to examine sacred Scripture and ecclesiastical power through the lens of the female body and Roberts' own lived experience. In other words, her voice could not be silenced by what Beauvoir called the female situation or condition.[8] With Kristeva, I would say that Roberts did not wait for the female condition to evolve "in order to realize [her] freedom" but that her female genius is illustrated precisely in the breach through and beyond the "situation."[9]

Of course, we cannot sweep aside Beauvoir's reflections on the female situation. To say that Roberts was able to write and thus to live is not to suggest that the Curia of the Roman Catholic Church was going to take her views seriously. Neither can we say that this would not frustrate or limit her in any way. Roberts had invested a great deal in the life of the church; she had been intensely religious as a child and adolescent.[10] In her last years at school, she had even thought about joining a Roman Catholic order of nuns. But in her late teens she broke with the church, unable to accept any longer what she saw as its attempts to control the expression of her female sexuality[11] or her passion for knowledge.[12] Yet, though she views herself in adulthood as an atheist, as a mature writer she still admits the significance of her connections with the Roman Catholic Church's attitudes and values.[13] In other words, what a feminist critique reveals about the damage done to women by patriarchal frameworks should not be dismissed in this attempt to show the possibility of female genius.

It comes as no surprise that when Roberts engages—for example, with the church's account of Jesus' dis/embodiment—the encounter is often profoundly disturbing and painful. However, the temptation from the feminist perspective, at this point, is to see Roberts' experience in almost entirely negative terms—simply one more illustration of that female situation or condition in which women are reduced, in Kristeva's words, to "fuming against metaphysics" along with Beauvoir because they seem to be confined within her

[8] See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 608–40.

[9] Julia Kristeva, *Colette*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 407.

[10] Roberts, *Paper Houses*, 5.

[11] Roberts, *Paper Houses*, 9.

[12] Roberts, *Paper Houses*, 11.

[13] Roberts, *Paper Houses*, 130.

analysis of woman as "the Other," merely defining the male in order to "refuse her access to true humanity, the humanity of autonomy and freedom."[14]

Arguably it is too simplistic to suggest that the Christianity of Roberts' childhood ceased to be important to her as an adult—however problematically—or that she was only able to be a creative writer insofar as she could escape from its framing. I would suggest, instead, that Roberts' journey toward female genius comes about through continuing engagement with the personal and theological relationships of the patriarchal church that feminist theory has often cast in such a hostile light—though not entirely without cause, of course. This engagement can be seen as a kind of thinking that does not bracket off female desire or the pleasures of writing. We can say that it is the act of female genius to envisage an alternative: "to imagine a Christianity which was inspired by women as much as by men."[15] Female genius is achieved as much in the pleasures of dialogue with these problematic structures as in any straightforward repudiation.

It is quite clear, of course, that Roberts is strongly influenced by feminist theory and theology and that she is happy to describe herself in these terms.[16] However, my case for calling Roberts a female genius does not rest on her ideological perspective but rather on her willingness to continue writing and to raise questions when she encounters limitations on her freedom to think, form new relationships, or write in new words as she grapples with the pressures to cut out what had been deemed unacceptably feminine within a normatively masculine framework.

The Wild Girl / Secret Gospel

In her novel *The Wild Girl*,[17] Roberts seems to imply, beyond critique, that there is something more to Christianity than patriarchy, an idea she may have begun to form at university, when she studied some notable medieval women mystics including Margery Kempe, Julian of Norwich, and Mechthild of Magdeburg and recognized that their mystical and theological insights were achieved without conformity to patriarchal theology or in accordance with

[14] Kristeva, *Colette*, 405.

[15] Roberts, *Paper Houses,* 9.

[16] Roberts, *Paper Houses,* 69.

[17] *The Wild Girl* was first published in 1984 with Methuen. An edition under a new title, *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, with a new preface was published by Vintage Books in 2007.

the authority of ordained clergy.[18] So then, it is in the spirit of these women, as well as under the influence of second-wave feminism—about which she began to read after graduation[19]—that she writes *The Wild Girl*, which questions some fundamental patriarchal assumptions about the nature of God and divine incarnation but does so from the singular perspective of a woman who writes for the sustaining pleasure it gives her.

Naturally enough, the book incorporates the findings of an emerging feminist biblical scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s with which Roberts was acquainted through friends[20] and her own reading, particularly Elaine Pagels' work on the gnostic gospels.[21] As a student, Roberts had read M. R. James' *The Apocryphal New Testament*, liking "its smell of heresy, of banned stories,"[22] but the idea of banned Christian texts specifically concerning or written by women in the earliest centuries of the Christian era gained powerful impetus with the publication of Pagels' work on the Nag Hammadi texts.

This work, informed by stirrings in feminist theory, helped to familiarize a wider readership with texts such as the gnostic *Gospel of Mary*, in which Mary Magdalene appeared to play a more prominent role than canonical biblical exegesis allowed. In identifying the wild girl of her novel with Mary Magdalene, whom Christian tradition identified as the reformed prostitute, Roberts drew on this work to take issue with the practice of polarizing Christian women as either holy, sexless mothers or bad (sexy) whores.[23] In the author's note to *The Wild Girl*, for example, she acknowledges the influence of the Nag Hammadi text "Thunder, Perfect Mind" on this novel and makes explicit reference to the evidence that, in fourth-century Egypt, the use of this text was officially discouraged,[24] implying that it had been read and

[18] Roberts, *Paper Houses*, 11.

[19] Roberts, *Paper Houses*, 69.

[20] E.g., novelist and theologian Sara Maitland. Roberts, *Paper Houses*, 130.

[21] The Nag Hammadi library about which Elaine Pagels writes in *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979) and within which the texts that particularly inspired Roberts' novel *The Wild Girl* can be found is composed of fifty-two texts that were recovered from caves in the Jabal al-Tărif mountain near the town of Nag Hammadi in 1945. Work on the texts suggests that some may date from as early as the second century C.E.

[22] Roberts, *Paper Houses*, 11.

[23] Michèle Roberts, *The Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene* (London: Vintage Books, 2007), 9.

[24] Athanasius of Alexandria's Easter letter in 367 called for apocryphal writings to be eliminated from all the monastery libraries in Egypt. See Marvin Meyer, ed., *The Gnostic Gospels: The Sacred Writings of the Nag Hammadi Library, The Berline Gnostic Codex and Codex Tchacos* (London: The Folio Society MMVIII, 2007), xiii.

valued before that date, enough in some part of the Christian community for the copies that were discovered in the 1940s to have been hidden for protection or preservation.

Feminist reading prompts Roberts to speculate imaginatively that the early church may have associated some significance aside from sinful materiality with women and the feminine and to construct her novel on that basis. In the preface to the 1984 edition of the novel, Roberts cites the comments of her friend—writer and feminist theologian Sara Maitland—that contemporary theological scholarship agrees the Gospels "are not simple reportage but the first attempts at theology"[25] to indicate that in writing this novel, she was at one and the same time attempting to dissect and recreate a myth.

She strives to achieve a female subjectivity, while more fully aware of the limitations imposed by male normativity perhaps than any of the women considered so far, by trying to formulate a new theological relationship through the pleasures of writing, one that answered to her own needs rather than those of the malestream. In doing this, *The Wild Girl* was also drawing the New Testament narrative of Jesus into relationship with the experiences of Roberts' own life in London in the 1970s and 1980s. This period was characterized by changing sexual mores and gender roles as well as a new emphasis on materiality and lifestyles that drew on psychoanalysis and non-Western traditions and that seemed less ambivalent about the female body than traditional Christianity. Heather Walton proposes the feminist suggestion that by making Jesus and Mary Magdalene lovers "Roberts touches the place of pain women experience in relation to the eradication of female sexuality from the dominant tradition. . . . In the process she re-visions divine and human authority and presents male and female existence as potentially harmonious; capable of generating interpenetrating erotic pleasure rather than perpetual enmity."[26]

Some readers loved *The Wild Girl*, and, predictably, some were deeply offended by it.[27] For Roberts, however, even more than making an ideologically feminist point, this novel confirmed her in her own mind as a writer. Writing was not a substitute for living but—as the work of female genius—made living possible; it rooted her as subject in the work of representing the misogyny of the Christian church and bringing it into question. Through her writing she could identify and resist the kind of bracketing and exclusion that

[25] Roberts, *Paper Houses,* 9,

[26] Walton, *Imagining Theology*, 81–82.

[27] There was an attempt to have the British publisher Methuen prosecuted for blasphemous libel, and Roberts received her share of hate mail. Roberts, *Paper Houses,* 264.

had been so prominent an element of her previous experience of Christianity, come to some clearer understanding of theology/God-talk, and flourish or live more fully. So *The Wild Girl* expresses Roberts' singular commitment to her own pleasures and ambitions as well as to her passionate curiosity about Christian theology and its construction of her world. In the energetic struggle with language, "repeatedly diving into the unconscious to find new forms, new stories, new meanings of words," she found her compass, writing her pleasure and using this as a means of negotiating the currents of a cultural context characterized but not exhausted by the tenets of feminist criticism.[28]

In form, the narrative of *The Wild Girl* partakes of that traditional feminist strategy of "re-vision" familiar from the theoretical work of Adrienne Rich[29] whereby old texts and narratives are read against the grain of existing patriarchal interpretations. Today, feminist theologians and critics may be more wary of attempting to reread the existing traditions—however resistantly—for fear of contributing to conservative forces by privileging their mythic forms,[30] and this may be a warning well taken. Yet for Roberts in the early 1980s, this was her way of suggesting new kinds of relationships to address the particularity of her own challenges.

For example, in accordance—after Beauvoir—with the feminist construction of women as outside or beyond the normative perspective, Roberts paints a picture of female potential "at the margins." On the refuse heaps created by masculinist exclusions, women do not simply endure but create and give life to the unexpected and the unforeseen. In one of Roberts' accounts of her character Mary's dreams, the destructive energy of fire and the promise of new life are combined in a vision of a burning pile of refuse: "On the top of the [great heap of rubbish] which had become a pyre someone had abandoned a baby, a tiny girl who began to cry."[31]

Writing the story of a sexy holy woman, Roberts voices her objections to Christian representations of Christ, of women, and of gospel offered throughout her formative convent education, but she seeks through the pleasures of writing to shift us into a new framework within which, in her project, relationships between God and humankind and between men and women can be seen differently. The heterogeneous mixture of colors, sounds, and moods

[28] Roberts, *Paper Houses,* 217.
[29] See above p. 34, note 4.
[30] Walton, *Imagining Theology*, 86.
[31] Michèle Roberts, *The Wild Girl* (London: Minerva, 1991), 17.

in old—biblical—stories and newly voiced—female—priorities kindled in her writing, is like the steaming, smoking refuse heap Roberts describes in the passage above, digesting recognizable forms of language, thought, and relationships to produce the odor of decay but also fire for cleansing and fertile ground for new writing.

However, this is not to ignore the constraints or the implicit violence of either Roberts' context in the London of the 1970s and 1980s or of her own responses to that context. Roberts knows that female bodies continue literally to be thrown onto the rubbish heap behind the sacrificial altars of patriarchal and misogynistic idealizations, and Walton notes, in relation to some of Roberts' other novels that concern themselves with Christian and theological themes, that some of Roberts' later work appears to express "a sense of irrecoverable loss."[32] Nevertheless, though her story about Mary describes the limitations she imagines would be faced by the first-century woman who felt called to take a role of leadership in the movement led by Jesus, she is also, as both protagonist and author, taking on the role of theologian, concerned with finding new ways to find meaning as well as to talk about God, Christianity, and the Church.

Roberts draws on the gnostic theologies of the Nag Hammadi library and other apocryphal texts but expands the hints they give about gender as symbolic framework. She plays with the idea of the originary divine fullness, or *pleroma*,[33] and with the mythic dramas that speak about falling or splitting and ultimately healing and returning to fullness. She weaves the story of Mary, as a first-century wild child, into the gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry, passion, and death, augmenting it with a resurrection appearance based on the account in the Gospel of John and an apocryphal account of Mary Magdalene's attempts to explain her final encounter with the risen Lord to the rest of the disciples.

Roberts expresses her theological response to these issues, drawing on gnostic and apocalyptic imagery explored in another series of dream sequences. In the first dream sequence, in which she focuses on the story of creation, Ignorance, the son of Sophia, is like the gnostic demiurge of the Valentinian myth of Sophia. Charged with the manual labor of creation by higher powers, he imagines that he is God and forgets his own created nature. He forgets his own origins in a larger divine fullness, typically represented in Roberts'

[32] Walton, *Imagining Theology*, 84.

[33] This idea is addressed, e.g., in the *Tripartite Tractate*—a treatise of Valentinian theology included in Meyer, *Gnostic Gospels*, 45–84, 685–88.

novel through the imagery of marriage or sexual encounter. We might want to critique its implicit heterosexism, but it succeeds in counterbalancing masculine singularity with the feminine in a material and embodied as well as in a spiritual sense. In interpreting the dream, Jesus tells Mary that creation is an ongoing process in which different—here male and female—forms of knowledge are involved. The nature of the story as concerned with a "fall" of some kind points to the consequences for God's people of ignoring the dual nature of God as both masculine and feminine[34] and of forgetting—the work of the children of Ignorance—what they originally knew.

Mary's dream visions remain dark and chaotic, and that is hardly surprising. Though Roberts is benefiting from the work of earlier feminist writers, her thoughts must still have seemed somewhat outrageous when she listened with the ear of the dominant culture, and the work, though pleasurable to a degree that sustained her writing, had to be undertaken without complete confidence that she would be taken seriously. Her fears as an author working in her "writer's garret" in London are reflected in her vision of Mary in a tiny first-century community, no longer supported by the earthly presence of Jesus, facing the suspicion and scorn of people to whom she feels obliged to speak about the unaccountable vision of divine and feminine fullness she and Jesus had explored together.

Dream sequences take on an apocalyptic character. As Mary/Roberts struggles to give shape to her dreams, she draws on the extreme violence of the biblical book of Revelation to express the level of difficulty that would be required to rid men and women of the visions the Christian churches have fed them under the influence of Ignorance. Mary faces up to the "red mist" of her "bloodlust and desire for revenge" directed by her feminine persona within the dream at the anti-Christ whom, in a final, revelatory collapse, she recognizes as "naked and vulnerable," simply a man, stretching out his arms toward her and all the other injured women of history.[35] In the final sequence of the book, Roberts is neither defiant nor triumphalist. She clearly believes there is still enough female suffering at the hands of men in the twentieth century, not to speak of all there has been in the past, to justify the words she puts into the mouths of the women who attend the apocalyptic judgment of men.[36] Nevertheless, she closes with Mary's words of restraint and perplexity concerning the book she had written about the best and the worst the world had to offer women:

[34] Roberts, *Wild Girl*, 82.
[35] Roberts, *Wild Girl*, 173.
[36] Roberts, *Wild Girl*, 172.

> I do not want this book to cause outrage, I do not want my work to lead anyone into danger. I shall carry with me in my heart the words that I must speak in future, and I shall leave these words buried under the tree, to ripen there or to rot. It seems to me that ideas are dangerous. Have not my visions taught me how we are willing to kill each other for the sake of an idea, for the sake of keeping a dream pure and intact? Yet, too, the force of Ignorance is an equal danger, and my mission, as I heard it plainly in my dream, is to warn against Ignorance, and to preach an Idea. In this great tumult of soul, in this confusion, and with a divided mind, I shall depart, with a baggage of doubt.[37]

In this concluding sequence of *The Wild Girl*, there is uncertainty. In her own voice, in the preface, Roberts distinguishes her account as "poetic" rather than "scholarly."[38] The notion of the "poetic" indicates, surely, not just a different mode of thought and creativity but also a similar lack of confidence about one of the categories within which I have placed her, that of theologian. This would make sense. I have argued strongly that to be a female genius does not imply immunity at every point from the potentially malign influence of patriarchal culture so much as a willingness to engage with it, drawing on the maternal birthing body of the female geniuses' own energies and pleasures to fuel contestation and challenge and to forestall exclusive definition within that culture. Following Beauvoir's lead, a variety of contemporary feminist critiques have theorized the extreme difficulty of doing this in degrees not excluding the total silencing of erasure. Yet women like Roberts continue in numerous ways that we may see or we may not to defy those limitations and arguably also to bring about transformations, not the least of which has been the development of feminist theory itself.

It has been my object so far to show how the work of the female genius who creates or births without reference to an exclusively masculine power of divinity can be illustrated in the singular circumstances of individual lives, such as those of Leade, More, Royden, and, lastly, Roberts. In a world after Freud, of course, the language of the unconscious comes naturally to Roberts as it does not to the others, and she links it consistently with her creative work. "Diving into the unconscious" brings her in contact with a realm that is chaotic and disturbing and in which she sometimes fears she will get lost.[39] Yet it is in engaging with this affective strangeness and discomfort through

[37] Roberts, *Wild Girl*, 180

[38] Roberts, *Wild Girl*, 9.

[39] Roberts, *Secret Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, 126.

the process of writing—contesting inherited symbolic representations of Christianity, for example—that she is able to give shape to energies and to think creatively. Writing and rebellion go hand in hand in her life as she gives up the certainties and securities of marriage or a settled career to experiment with Marxism and feminism, sexuality, foreign cities and countries, and to explore and make sense of all this through writing.[40]

Beauvoir concluded that women's lives had been "dispersed among the males, attached through residence, housework, economic condition and social standing to certain men—fathers or husbands for example—more firmly than they are to other women"[41] in such a way that their presence in history was somehow in doubt. At the same time I believe that women have not merely suffered but sometimes dealt with this fragmentation, creatively sustaining forms of resistance, tradition, and connection in limiting circumstances. It is therefore crucially important, in order to contest any lingering sense of male domination, not to gloss over the lives of women as if they must have failed because of these limiting circumstances. Specifically in relation to those women who write to make sense of Christian theology, I have used the idea of female genius to suggest that the idea of their insignificance—or even absence—is an illusion produced by the normatively male context Beauvoir defined so astutely in *The Second Sex*.

While we can never forget that women may have been driven into silence—accounted mad or monstrous[42]—some, perhaps many, have refused to discount desire and accept silence, pursuing in some way an understanding of God on their own terms that of course includes the struggle with a normative male perception of their worth. In these terms it is possible to see Roberts' work as an illustration of the subject position Beauvoir shows us was so hard to achieve and Kristeva describes as female genius. She is a writer, valuing the "hot pulse of [her] desire"[43] sufficiently sometimes to acknowledge that it confirms her as a female genius, genuinely involved in devloping theology. And perhaps we see that insight given literary form in Roberts' female character who awakens with terror to her own creativity—the passage with which this piece began.

[40] Roberts, *Paper Houses*, 55.

[41] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 19.

[42] See, e.g., Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), for a classic treatment of this theme.

[43] Roberts, *Impossible Saints*, 36.

Conclusion

God gave us intelligence to force us to seek knowledge of things.

—Gabrielle Suchon, *Traité de la morale et de la politique*

In 2009 Ramita Naval reported in a Channel 4 program in the Unreported World series—"Turkey: Killing for Honour"—that in order to evade the consequences of what was then new Turkish legislation against so-called "honor killings," Kurdish communities were forcing women and girls to take their own lives or, in some cases, commissioning younger men to kill them in order to avoid the longer sentences that would be meted out to their fathers and uncles.[1] This kind of incident—systematic rape, domestic violence, trafficking, and sex slavery—could unfortunately be duplicated in the media on a more or less weekly basis. It draws attention to gendered violence in the twenty-first century and points to the continuing relevance of feminist analysis that identifies forms of violence and injustice based on polarized gender discourse.

However, there is always a danger when writers—academics, theorists, journalists—from liberal Western perspectives publish stories like these about the brutal oppression of women in "other" parts of the world. Whatever their intentions, the risk remains of reducing the reported gendered violence

[1] Ramita Navai (reporter) and Matt Haan (producer), "Turkey: Killing for Honour," *Unreported World*, accessed June 9, 2011, http://www.channel4.com/programmes/unreported-world/episode-guide/series-2009/episode-3.

or gendered inequality as characteristic of these "other" contexts. Crucially, there is a danger of perpetuating unfounded Western liberal myths about the barbarism outside its borders in ways that serve actually to increase polarizations[2] while veiling the problems of gendered violence and inequality that continue to exist much closer to home. One of the most persistent of these myths claims to measure the degree of civilization in any society by the way it treats and respects women. In the cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek's words, commenting on French legislation that bans the full-body veil from French streets and other public places, "one cannot but note how the allegedly universalist attack on the burqua on behalf of human rights and women's dignity ends up as a defense of the particular French way of life."[3]

In this context, too, Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of how relationships between men and women are determined by the values and perspectives of the normative male is very often smoothed away in the assumption that the "sinister nature of gender"[4] has now been dispelled, for example in the context of recent legal codifications of equal rights. Beauvoir's actual analysis and her own revealing uncertainties in relation to it are ignored, and we slip into the black-and-white view that the revolution is over, and it simply needs to be implemented more consistently to succeed completely. In this brave new world, the values of modern Western-style democracy, law, and international relations are elevated to a state of near final certainty. Meanwhile, the voices and stories of women, when they are actually listened to, tell a different and always much more complicated story.

Therefore, the argument that women—female geniuses—can be said to achieve subjectivity in circumstances characterized by a normative male perspective should not be seen as an attempt to challenge continuing feminist efforts to dismantle limitations imposed on women wherever they exist. It is rather—to use Kristeva's term—a modest attempt to suggest that Beauvoir was perhaps too pessimistic about the capability of women—including those who identified themselves as Christians—to exceed those limitations. Nevertheless, though we may need to supplement her account of how women

[2] This is a topic that has, of course, been widely discussed, particularly in the years since the publication of Edward Said's influential book, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

[3] Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2011), 1.

[4] Pamela Sue Anderson, "The Lived Body, Gender and Confidence," in *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate*, ed. Pamela Sue Anderson (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2010), 177.

have been unable to achieve subjectivity in the past with Kristeva's claim that female geniuses predate and may even have contributed to the transformations of women's lives we have seen over the last century, Beauvoir's philosophical work continues to be significant. It remains important in particular in the ways in which it has continued to generate discussion about the situation of women in different global contexts as well as the much broader questions of the nature of "woman" or, we could say with reference particularly to the work of Judith Butler, of the ethics of gender.

In other words, women—including those in the past—need contexts in which to be heard much more clearly. Research into women's work and women's lives globally and historically needs to go on. The voices and texts we need to consult will not only be female or female authored, nor will they necessarily reveal stories of oppression and victimization, though it is more than possible that they will do this sometimes. In this research, Beauvoir's analysis of the normative male perspective or imaginary will continue to be a useful point of reference to make clearer the contested nature of female subjectivity. However, the idea of female genius outlined in this book can also help to reveal these dynamics. They are not, ultimately, mutually exclusive forms of analysis in this important work.

The issue of Christianity has also been central to this book. The modern feminist movement in the Western world grew up in an Enlightenment context in which concepts like autonomy and reason appeared to liberate men from the "self-inflicted immaturity"[5] of ideas about gods and miracles. Although this discourse was more often than not blind to the question of women, feminist analysis has still tended to view Christianity in these critical terms; revealed religion was "necessarily heteronomous," as Kant developed the sense of the term.[6] Daphne Hampson, arguing strongly that feminists are "Heirs of the Enlightenment,"[7] sums up this argument: "the very word religion means to be bound (to God). Enlightenment is the overthrow of such an outlook: humanity is to come into its own. It follows that . . . one must simply say that women and men have equal rights and dignity and that that concludes the matter."[8] Enlightenment ideas of reason and autonomy clearly offer a pathway toward equality, and yet Enlightenment thinkers have

[5] Daphne Hampson, "Kant and the Present," in *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Anderson, 150.

[6] Hampson, "Kant and the Present," 147.

[7] Hampson, "Kant and the Present," 150.

[8] Hampson, "Kant and the Present," 151.

continued to maintain ambivalent and sometimes quite nonrational definitions of humankind by excluding women and the feminine and by gendering reason as male. In other words, reason in modernity has been increasingly equated with the power of logic and empirical science to mold the world to human needs. Women, too, have conformed to this Enlightenment perception of reason as male, even when this has excluded them from engaging their own powers of reason in public debate. The associated identification of Christianity with illogical and nonempirical thinking and emotionally identified turmoil—both gendered female—has undoubtedly made rejecting it all the more politic for ambitious women. And this is even before the specifically feminist critiques of Christianity formulated by Beauvoir and Daly appeared.

Now these polarized accounts of reason and emotion are being questioned, with feminist critique joining forces, for example, with postcolonial critique that similarly requires us to recognize our normative reference points and be prepared to change them. One recent illustration, makes reference to Jayadeva's portrayal of Radha's passion for the young god Krishna. In this context Jessica Frazier writes about " a non-objectivist, embodied, emotional conception of reason"[9] that challenges the Western view of masculine reason uninformed by emotion. In the Indian context she describes, Frazier points out that this differently framed view of reason is as attractive to men as to women.[10] In the theological narrative the *Gitagovinda*, Frazier sums up this alternative view by arguing that a "classical Indian conception of the organ of thought" incorporates both heart and mind.[11]

From a very different direction, Pamela Sue Anderson has also argued against the way in which "reason" is defined in the West, to the exclusion of female-identified desire and human embodiment, both of which, she says, need to be taken on board in formulating any notion of the reasonable or rational in a post-Kantian sense, since neither can be excluded from the processes of rational thought or decision making.[12] Anderson's post-Kantian thinking targets the epistemic privilege of masculine-identified rationality and argues for female desire to be fully acknowledged within what she calls

[9] Jessica Frazier, "Becoming the Goddess: Female-Subjectivity and the Passion of the Goddess Radha," in *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Anderson, 202.

[10] Frazier, "Becoming the Goddess," 201.

[11] Frazier, "Becoming the Goddess," 206.

[12] Pamela Sue Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 19–23.

"rational passion." Her book *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (1998) was precisely an attempt to shift a philosophical discussion about God away from foundational principles that were subtly but detectably gendered to look for an alternative understanding of the post-Kantian rationale that might be applied, for example, in the context of formulating rational grounds for identifying oneself as Christian. Her argument proposed a number of strategies including, building on Sandra Hardwick's work, strong objectivity; building on Irigaray's early work, mimesis and refiguring the ancient myths; building on the work of bell hooks, yearning for fulfillment; and, building on the work of Parita Mukta, a concept of dissenting devotion modeled on the life of a sixteenth-century Rajasthani woman, Mirabai. These kinds of attempts to challenge the gendering of reason within contexts of normative Western forms of liberalism have potentially begun to unsettle the certainties of early second-wave liberal feminism, in particular that no woman in her right mind would have anything to do with "religion,"[13] unthinkingly, in the main, identified with a cultural memory of Christianity.

Quite clearly, the four women in this book have had a good deal to do with Christianity, not all of which could be said merely to support patriarchal norms or the oppression of women. This book does not contain proposals for reconstructing orthodox theistic Christianity. Nevertheless, it can be seen as a contribution to the discussion between Christianity and feminism, since the point has been to clear away some hardened assumptions about the relationship between women and Christianity in the past.

The conclusion of my exploration of female genius within English Christianity is to claim that women have not lacked creative energy, guile, motivation, or indeed the subjectivity demonstrated in their involvement in a range of actions, gestures, styles, or discursive topics, including reflection on the nature of God, Christianity, and the meaning of life. I have used the idea of female genius to suggest that the idea of women's insignificance within—or even absence from—the Christian churches, while it may be a devastating reality for some, is equally an illusion produced to significant effect by the normatively male context Beauvoir defined so acutely in *The Second Sex*. While we can never forget that women have been driven mad—sometimes

[13] Kathleen O'Grady, "The Tower and the Chalice: Julia Kristeva and the Story of Santa Barbara," in *Religion in French Feminist Thought: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Morny Joy, Kathleen O'Grady, and Judith L. Poxon (London: Routledge, 2003), 87.

literally[14]—by systematic attempts to refuse them entry, voice, and power and to discount them at every turn, we also need to recognize that some women have refused to discount desire or accept silence in whatever context available to them in which to struggle to achieve female genius.

This study has focused on four women chosen for their commitment to Christianity because this often appears to be regarded as a "worst-case" scenario for women; in other words, the context of the Christian church is seen to reduce the role of women purely to that of reproduction, while continuing to teach "theological conclusions originally based in ignorance of women's genetic contribution to offspring," not to speak of the "learned basis of most gender difference."[15] Yet the study of these four women reveals that creativity—the ability to think, the work of the imagination, and the capacity to recast existing relationships and bring something new "to birth"—remains possible for women as they address what might be called the ever-present threat of suffocation within conditions of normative masculinity and systematic heterosexism. Taken together, I have argued, such a succession of female geniuses presents a challenge to liberal feminist arguments about female exclusion that are significantly lacking in nuance. It is exclusive and distorting to imagine that women have had no input into the present state of things.

Of course, there is a danger implicit in questioning the argument—the feminist conviction—that normative masculinity has constituted a closed system that constructs women and the feminine through exclusion, and I take that danger seriously. I do not believe, for example, that female emancipation is necessarily irreversible or that it is no longer imperative to argue or actively campaign for it. However, the greatest challenge at this point, it would seem to me, would be the temptation to stop thinking and for any new status quo insidiously to establish the view that we have exhausted this particular seam or gone "far enough." Beauvoir's question "What is a woman?" remains potentially explosive, since it demands that we reconsider every unthinking assumption about the nature, role, capacity, or history of those we have previously defined in this term.

Let us go back, then, very briefly at the end to the philosopher Michèle Le Doeuff, who has herself brought interesting women from Europe's

[14] See, e.g., Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), for a classic treatment of this theme.

[15] Christine Gudorf, *Body, Sex and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 129.

Christian past to light, seeing far more in their recorded words and actions than an account of silence and victimization, yet without being blind to the limitations they have encountered as a consequence of their gender. Le Doeuff writes, for example, about Gabrielle Suchon[16] (1631–1703), a French writer, philosopher, and arguably, female genius, who had no knowledge of Wollstonecraft or Beauvoir but who, nonetheless, did not need to wait for the present age to know or to question why she was being excluded by men. In *Traité de la morale et de la politique* (1693), Suchon launched a principled attack on "flimsy and misleading" principles that proposed one could not learn without instruction and that were clearly intended to keep women ignorant because they were not permitted to attend schools and universities.[17] Suchon is scandalized that women are unable to attend schools and participate in formal learning, but, her underlying concern is that in this way, women are being discouraged from thinking altogether and thus allowed to fall more easily into ignorance and sin when this was avoidable. She says we must "incite women and girls to wake from their slumbers and pull themselves out of the ignorance in which they spend their lives." In *Traité de la morale et de la politique*, the sin of Adam and Eve in "a delightfully heterodox interpretation of the episode of the apple" becomes the sin of those who aim to consume knowledge like food—as Adam and Eve eat the fruit—rather than to engage their minds in acts of reflection on the tree of life and of the knowledge of good and evil, as God first intended. Thus, "far from being a sin, then, knowledge is a duty and a means of salvation."[18]

Like her contemporary Jane Leade and innumerable other women after her, then, Suchon gives expression to her insight and commitment—as female genius—both to herself and to other Christian women, through this witty, angry, and intelligent reading of a Christian text. Forms of contemporary feminist scholarship and philosophy have been instrumental in bringing such readings to light in the present, but what that work has begun to show is, of course, that even where the imaginary shared by these women is unavoidably Christian, their lives cannot be reduced to mere victimization and silence.

[16] Michèle Le Doeuff, *The Sex of Knowing*, trans. Kathryn Hamer and Lorraine Code (New York: Routledge, 2003), 192.

[17] Le Doeuff, *The Sex of Knowing*, 34–35.

[18] Le Doeuff, *The Sex of Knowing*, 34–35.

Therefore, contemporary feminist discourse needs to recognize that we do have a past that informs our present and our ongoing discussions with each other, globally, in much more complex ways than merely in terms of a negative—for example, Christian—legacy, thankfully disposed of. To ignore the challenging and insightful ways in which women have shown themselves able to engage with the Christian imaginaries of the past is, once again, to diminish and trivialize their capacity to survive, to struggle, to contest, and thus to flourish even in the most inauspicious of circumstances.

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